



FELICIA GREENE

THE UNMARRIAGEABLES: BOOK THREE

# A SCHOLAR

*and his Sins*

# A Scholar and his Sins

by Felicia Greene

‘... And it’s because of that, gentlemen, that I’ve come to you.’ Leo Thornfall sat back in his chair, winded. He was unaccustomed to speaking for long periods, even to his dearest friends; he held a hand to his chest, trying to catch his breath before continuing. ‘I’m in desperate need of help, and you are my only hope.’

Benedict Harrow and His Grace Henry Spall, Duke of Marton, stared from their respective chairs as if Leo had grown an extra head. The duke’s study on the Marton Estate was always warm, a fire merrily crackling in the grate whenever the temperature became unpleasant, but a chill ran through Leo’s body all the same.

He really did need help. Quick, thorough help. But his plan for solving his particular problem, even though it had seemed perfectly reasonable while frantically going over it at his desk in the wee small hours of the morning, sounded faintly ridiculous now that it had left his lips.

The letter in his waistcoat pocket rustled as he shifted in his chair. Alice's letter; his sister still had beautiful penmanship, even when she was in the depths of despair.

*... Father says that because you wish to devote your life to fripperies and nonsense, hiding away in a library, it is up to me to ensure the continued good name of the family. To that end, rather than allow me to continue my studies with Madame Delacroix and Professor Weeks, he insists that I must enter the social whirl and find a husband—unless you see fit to change your ways and begin to behave as the gentleman he expected to produce...*

A despicable move on the part of his father, but Leo expected nothing less from the man. He had to have been planning this move for months, trying to pick exactly what would force his only son to emerge from the library and attempt to engage with the world. Leo, fighting the urge to rub his furrowed brow, waited for the opinions of his friends.

Marton and Harrow were fine people. Not only fine people, but people with enough elasticity and resilience of mind to listen to unusual problems without immediate censure. He wouldn't have gone to any of his other friends—all scholars like him, all focused on their chosen intellectual obsessions to the exclusion of all else—and told them that not only did he have to transform himself into a fashionable gentleman in less than a month, he also had to display himself at the next widely-attended ball to such tremendous effect that his father would stop harassing Alice for at least a year.

A huge dilemma. An enormous request, given how thoroughly he had fallen into scruffy anonymity after years of study at the expense of everything else. A quiet country life, a distaste for balls and a deep dislike of standing for hours in a tailor's shop had only made him look even less like a gentleman; he took a swift glance at himself in a nearby mirror, trying not to feel sheer alarm at the amount of transformation that could be ahead.

*Come now. Be reasonable.* He tried to steel himself. *A new pair of trousers and a poem learned by heart, and you'll be ready for any fashionable gathering.*

'Forgive me. I've lost the thread of this. Perhaps it's because I'm not a scholar.' Benedict held a hand to his forehead, pausing with such significance that Leo wondered for a moment if he'd stumbled into a play. 'You wish to become a gentleman of fashion.'

'No. I don't want to become a gentleman of fashion at all. I'm being forced to become a gentleman of fashion, because otherwise my father will stop my poor sister receiving an education befitting the

strength of her mind.'

'Right. I can arrive at that point. And in order to assume the disguise of a gentleman of fashion, you need lessons.'

'Exactly. Lessons in how to converse. How to look. How to—how to behave as if I give a damn about any of it. I know it's an imposition, given the various demands on your time and attention as husbands and fathers, but I don't know who else to ask.' He pushed down his shame, the sheer embarrassment of having to ask, and continued. 'It's imperative that I'm enough of a success at the Berriwick Ball for my father to hear about it.'

'The Berriwick Ball is in three week's time, Thornfall.' Marton frowned. 'How on earth do you expect to manage it?'

'I didn't think I was that much of a hopeless case!'

'I don't mean that. Of course you're not a hopeless case.' The concern in Marton's eyes made a mockery of his words. 'But still... quite the time-line.'

Three weeks. Three weeks to dress and talk and act as if the whole thing wasn't absolutely awful. Leo pushed his spectacles up the bridge of his nose, his longing for a quiet library so acute that it was almost a physical pain.

He wouldn't be good at this. He'd spent so long being good at anything he tried, solving complex problems with dazzling speed in any number of fields from astronomy to geology, that the thought of being bad at something—at stumbling, failing, making a fool of himself—brought him out in a cold sweat despite the heat of the fire.

What was worse, his friends no longer looked confused. Marton still had a hint of sheer bewilderment about him, but Benedict looked positively content. Mr. Harrow was a relatively new friend, his rakish charm utterly at odds to the scholarly gentleness which Leo normally tried to have around him, but his expertise in this area couldn't be denied.

He cleared his throat. 'Well?'

'I do have an idea.' Benedict paused. 'Quite an ambitious idea, but you're not afraid of a little ambition. Are you?'

'No. Of course not.' He was afraid of everything, including this conversation. 'I adore ambition.'

'Truly?' Marton raised an eyebrow. 'I've never seen you demonstrate a love of ambition before.'

'Now that my sister's schooling hangs in the balance, you'll find me capable of anything.'

'Good.' Benedict nodded almost to himself, folding his arms. 'Then allow me to speak to Marton for a moment privately, to see if I've had an idea beyond the bounds of even the wildest imagination. If I've succeeded in inventing something workable, I'll tell you immediately.'

Fair?’

Leaving the room and letting them gossip about him didn’t sound fair in the slightest, but he was hardly in a position to argue. Leo nodded. ‘Don’t send too long deciding my fate.’

‘I doubt it’ll take more than ten minutes.’

‘Ten minutes? All you’ll have to do is show me which cravat to buy and tell me how to address an earl’s wife!’

‘Thornfall. You’ve come to me with a serious problem.’ Benedict looked positively saintly. ‘Allow me to invent a serious solution, treating the matter with as much care as it deserves.’

This had been a terrible idea. Leo suppressed a sigh, gave a short bow, and left the room without giving into his urge to slam the door.

He repressed the urge to listen at the door. Marton and Harrow were irritating, to be sure, but they were good-hearted. Instead he leaned against the flocked wallpaper, idly toying with one of the many ceramic frogs sitting on a nearby table and wishing he had brought a book.

Even without listening through the wood of the door, it was evident that Marton and Harrow were having a spirited debate. More specifically, Marton was doing the debating; Harrow’s low, laughing tone was one of a skilful trickster, using everything short of outright lying to get his way. Leo closed his eyes, trying with all his might to think of equations or the structure of shells rather than imagine what on earth they were talking about.

Eventually, after just enough time to make him feel thoroughly uneasy, Marton’s voice came clearly through the door. ‘Come back, Thornfall.’

‘Well?’ Leo entered and sat where he’d been before. ‘Don’t leave me in suspense.’

‘No suspense.’ Benedict smiled. ‘The only thing you must promise me, Mr. Thornfall, is that you won’t reject the idea out of hand.’

‘If Marton hasn’t, I won’t.’

‘I haven’t.’ Marton’s face was unreadable, but that wasn’t unusual. ‘Listen, and judge for yourself.’

‘Now. The first thing I must stress above all else is that Marton and I would love to help you. We truly would. But given that Bertha is reaching the end of her confinement and the estate is almost at its most productive time of year, there’s neither the time nor focus necessary to do as good and thorough a job as truly needs doing.’

‘Oh.’ Leo’s heart sank. ‘So it will be quite the job.’

‘Only if you want it done well, and you clearly do. A new cravat and the ability to dance one or two of the newest dances isn’t going to create the gentleman that your father wishes to see.’ Benedict paused. ‘For that, you need time. You need an isolated place, to aid learning.

And, of course, you need a teacher.'

An ancient thrill, something thoroughly instinctual, prickled down Leo's spine. There was no need to feel so uneasy, not really, but he did without knowing why.

'Someone with the time, knowledge and will to teach such a complex quantity of information is a rare find, but not impossible. In fact, I've thought of the perfect candidate—provided you agree, of course.'

'Well? Who?'

'Miss Fellowes.' Benedict's smile was almost too innocent. 'Miss Grace Fellowes.'

Now the thrill was much stronger. A bolt of lightning that shot through Leo at the mere sound of Miss Fellowes' name, stopping the breath in his lungs.

Miss Fellowes.

*Grace.*

'Her parents were among the most socially splendid of the ton in their day. They taught their daughter well. Before she made her protest against marriage, she was one of the most well-versed ladies in ton manners. If anyone can make you into a gentleman—'

'No.' Leo wanted to stand up, to walk away, but his legs had turned to jelly. 'Not Miss Fellowes. Not her.'

They couldn't know how he felt about Grace. How every time she came to the Marton estate to see Arabella or paint the blossoming plum trees on the grounds of the estate, his heart felt as if it was going to beat out of his chest. Every smile on her face, every word she spoke to him, every glance in his direction—oh, it all ended with him blushing and clumsy and utterly, utterly sure that he had somehow made an enormous fool of himself in front of her.

'It's cruel of you to reject Miss Fellowes out of hand as a teacher. She's written to Bertha several times in the past month saying that she's bored in Cumbria, that time seems to travel far more slowly in the castle, that she's in desperate need of a project to sustain her.' Benedict leaned forward in his chair. 'Would you really deny her the pleasure of your company for no good reason?'

There were a multitude of very good reasons to avoid seeing Grace at all costs. The fact that he couldn't stop looking at her whenever she walked into a room, the way sunlight seemed to shine on her face even if the sky was completely clouded over. The way he'd dreamed of her in the intimate darkness of his bedroom, shorn of her gown and shift, beckoning to him with a wicked smile that had him reaching for his rigid cock before he could stop himself. 'I... I wouldn't wish to inconvenience her.'

'But you'd be doing her a service. No inconvenience in the

slightest.'

'Half of the work will be buying clothes. I doubt the castle Miss Fellowes resides in is close to a tailor's establishment.'

'Nonsense. Miss Fellowes hardly dresses in rags—not that I imagine you pay all that much attention to what she wears.' Benedict's pause was almost long enough to seem significant, but he carried on speaking before Leo would think about it too much. 'There'll be staff, shops nearby. More than enough to help turn you into a gentleman of fashion without too much trouble at all.'

'And really, Thornfall. You must remember that you wish to pursue this cause for your sister. Not for yourself.' Marton's face was grave, but his face still had that infuriatingly unreadable expression. 'Are you really willing to deny her the chance of future schooling, all because of a little discomfort?'

A little discomfort? Discomfort wasn't the problem. He'd be entirely too comfortable tucked away with Grace in a remote Cumbrian castle, drinking in the sight of her, taking any chance he could to watch her. Maybe even touch her, if their fingers managed to brush by mistake by passing a teacup or something similar. But that would distract him from his ultimate goal of becoming a gentleman, and he'd be nothing but a tiresome annoyance to Grace. How could he ever be viewed as anything else?

But Alice needed him to do his best. To distract his father's critical eye, at least. Could he really throw away what looked like his most valid chance of success?

'You can refuse, of course.' Benedict sighed. 'We could probably come up with something else. That would take time—a week, perhaps two—but if you really think it best—'

'No. You're right.' The thought of waiting another week in such an agony of indecision was not to be borne. 'I'll do it.'

'Only if you're sure.'

'I'm sure.' The die was cast; he had to submit to his fate. The thrill of excitement that coursed through him could be pushed away, ignored until this whole ordeal was over. 'Thank you.'

'No need to thank us. You haven't arrived there yet.' Benedict looked at Marton, who reached for his pen and notepaper with a sigh. 'We'll begin making arrangements for a carriage now, so you have even less to think about. And I'll have Bertha write a letter to Grace this very day, to give her sufficient time for your arrival.'

'I'll need to leave tomorrow. Time is of the essence, and it'll take a week to arrive in Cumbria even with good weather.'

'No need to worry any longer, Mr. Thornfall.' Benedict rose from his chair, walked over to Leo and patted him on the shoulder in the manner of an elderly lady comforting a crying child. 'You'll return

from Cumbria the very height of fashion. Your sister will be left alone to pursue her studies for at least another year, if not two.'

'Thank you.' Perhaps everything really would be all right. As long as he didn't think at all about what was going to happen in Cumbria, he could pretend that Benedict's comforting voice held the key to future peace. 'Thank you very much. The both of you.'

'No matter, Thornfall.' Marton nodded. 'We'll see one another before you leave.'

Apparently it was all settled. To make even the most token form of protest would be nonsense. Leo stood, bowed, and left the room, Grace Fellowes having taken up residence in his head with no signs of moving.

Marton and Benedict waited until Benedict's footsteps could no longer be heard. The tension in the room faded, replaced with an unexpected ease.

'Harrow.' Marton shook his head as Benedict began to laugh. 'You really are a bastard.'

'You're just as much of a bastard as I am. You nodded along to the plan without a word of complaint.'

'I can't believe that my oldest and dearest friend was oblivious enough to fall for it. Are you sure we can't call him back and give him lessons ourselves for a week or two?'

'I don't want to be anywhere but Bertha's bedside until the baby's safely born. I feel for Thornfall, but I can't devote my time to him. And isn't Celandine just beginning to walk?'

'She is. She's also just beginning to escape her nurse.' Marton smiled. 'I fear I'll be needed as another pair of hands. She already won't listen to staff.'

'A spirited one.'

'Very spirited.' Marton's smile faded. 'But are you sure about this? Really?'

'Do you know what I'm sure of? I'm sure that I don't want to visit this glorious estate for Christmas, as I have for two years now, and once again see Thornfall and Miss Fellowes dancing around one another like the world's most timid ballerinas. Watching them is excruciating. They can make a simple request for salt sound like a passionate declaration of love.'

'Come now. They're not that bad.'

'Not yet. They'll only get worse. It has to be brought to a head somehow—this is the perfect way to do it. If I convince Bertha to write a letter, and you convince Arabella—'

'Arabella won't be convinced of anything without a damned good reason.'



‘The happiness of her friend is a good reason.’

‘Is Miss Fellowes really going to be happy about Mr. Thornfall being sent to her like a parcel?’

‘There’s not an awful lot she can do about it. We won’t send the letter until he’s practically on her doorstep.’

‘She’s going to be absolutely furious.’

‘Absolutely furious in Cumbria. So very different from absolutely furious in London. And she isn’t going to be angry with her friends, only with us—and even then, only if it comes to no good end.’

‘She’s completely uninterested in society now that she’s given up the idea of marriage. I can’t see her forming him into a gentleman in three weeks.’

‘She’ll do as good a job as any other lady of her upbringing would. The fact that she’s in love with him and doesn’t know it could be a slight fly in the ointment, but I couldn’t possibly comment.’

‘I can’t believe you’re stooping to playing Cupid.’

‘I’m far better than Cupid. I’m helping a friend in his hour of need, helping my wife’s friend discover as yet unknown regions of her personality, and ensuring a period free of responsibilities while my beloved wife is in confinement.’ Benedict leaned back in his armchair, his smile beatific. ‘To tell the truth, Marton, I’m something of an angel.’

‘That devil.’ Grace muttered angrily to herself as she stood on the castle wall, the stiff Cumbrian wind whipping back her hair. Her easel stood abandoned, the half-finished painting on it no longer holding any appeal. ‘That absolute devil.’

The letter had ostensibly come from Bertha, but she knew who was really behind it. Bertha hardly ever spoke of commonplace developments in her letters, none of the stuff of real life; she concentrated on her characters and their motivations, or the latest news from her publisher now that her first novel had been received to great acclaim. But this missive, this letter containing such an astonishing request, had another hand behind it.

Benedict Harrow made a wonderful husband to Bertha. He kept her feet on the ground while her writer’s brain roamed freely through the clouds, continuously demonstrating a love and loyalty that no one would ever have expected of the former rake. But when it came to poking his nose into other people’s business—other people’s personal, intensely private business—he had no idea when to stop meddling. To think that Mr. Thornfall was coming here—to think of it! Arriving at the castle with no real invitation on the very thinnest of pretexts!

Curse Mr. Harrow. Grace tried to breathe away her rage in the wind, taking a deep lungful of heather-scented air, but the anger

remained. Anger, embarrassment, and a good deal of something that she preferred not to examine at all. She crumpled the letter into a ball and shoved it into her reticule, burying it as deeply as possible.

Mr. Thornfall. Leo. At some point, some ill-defined future point that hadn't been detailed in the letter but which Grace could only irascibly define as 'soon', Leo was going to walk through the doors of this ancient, crumbling shack of a castle and demand that she make him into a gentleman for reasons that she still didn't quite understand, even though she'd read Bertha's somewhat hurried explanation three times over.

The castle, the ancestral seat of the Fellowes and decidedly showing its age, wasn't fit to receive so much as a beggar. She'd ostensibly been sent here in disgrace, after writing a letter to the papers along with her dearest friends to publicly declare that she would never marry. Grace had submitted to her punishment with a glad heart, knowing that acres of beautiful moorland and an endless supply of oils and linseed would allow her to paint to her heart's content for at least a year—but now Leo was going to arrive and ruin it.

Not that he was an unpleasant man. He was entirely too pleasant. So pleasant, in fact, that whenever she found herself in the same room as him, on the brief occasions when she visited the Marton estate, Grace found herself as tongue-tied and awkward as a child. A very dull child, who hadn't learned her letters well and didn't wish to demonstrate her ignorance.

It didn't make sense. She'd always assumed she'd develop a passion for someone like herself; blunt, brave, accustomed to long walks out of doors and wearing light clothes in cold weather. It would be reasonable to develop sentiment for someone who could share such passions. Quite why she completely lost her composure whenever Leo spoke to her, a bespectacled scholar who looked as if he'd never set foot beyond his own front door, she didn't know.

It was enough to invite despair. But despair wouldn't stop Leo arriving, with his pressing need for her to dredge up all of the childhood training that she'd gleefully thrown aside. If she could put her troublesome feelings aside, she could make the man into the most fashionable gentleman that the world had ever seen—but good Lord, she didn't *want* to.

She had absolutely no desire to make Leo Thornfall into a marriageable enough gentleman for some eagle-eyed young woman to bring up to scratch. The worst sort of selfishness, of course, given that she would never marry herself—not even a man who brought her heart to her throat as if on a fisherman's hook. But that was how she felt, felt down to her very bones, and there was very little she could

do about it.

She would have to write a letter to Bertha this very moment, telling her that it was simply impossible. Then she would have to persuade Mrs. Boyle, the ancient Fellowes housekeeper, to instruct one of the three maids in attendance to shutter the castle's windows and make it look as if they had all abandoned the place. An insane idea, something that would have her thrown into Bedlam had she been anywhere near London, but in Cumbria ideas could be a little wilder.

For two hours, she managed not to spiral into panic. She abandoned painting; the daubs currently on her canvas weren't fit for anything but turpentine, so she would start again once this whole ridiculous business was over and choose a more pleasant angle to begin from. Not that she'd had all that much luck choosing angles over the past few days, leading to a worrying amount of half-finished pictures and multicoloured paint scrapings lying all over the stones of the castle floors—but she would find her muse again, once this panic was over, and paint herself back into something resembling peace.

She went down to the kitchens and made herself a cup of tea, not wishing to disturb the maids. She drank her poorly-brewed drink in silence, trying to think of ways to break the news of her plan to Mrs Boyle and failing, then spent thirty minutes darning an old gown in her bedroom in a desperate attempt to find something, anything to do that wasn't directly addressing the problem at hand.

After two hours and one minute, she no longer felt as if the world was going to crumble around her ears. Then, with a prickle down her spine, she heard the distant rumble of carriage wheels.

No visitors came to the castle. Mrs Boyle travelled into the nearby village daily for provisions, but no-one was ever invited back. Neither did they have any need for a doctor, a tailor, a bookseller...

... oh, that *devil*.

Had Mr. Harrow really played the oldest trick in the book? Worse, had she fallen for it? Suppressing a word that was far too rude to say aloud, even in private, Grace shot to her feet as the half-mended gown fell onto the floor.

She would have to close all of the windows herself. She would have to invent some sort of excuse to send all of the maids, including Mrs Boyle, down to the cellars and then shut the door on them for at least an hour. But before she could come up with even more ridiculous plans, there was a cold, crisp knock at the door.

'Miss Fellowes?' Mrs Boyle's voice was unchanged; as stiff as a Scottish wind and about as sympathetic. 'Are you there?'

'Yes, Mrs Boyle.' She'd known the woman ever since childhood, and had never heard that voice soften even when the tenderest of actions was being performed. With the carriage coming closer to the

castle, nothing her housekeeper was about to say would be tender in the slightest. 'Come in.'

Mrs Boyle entered. Straight-backed, dressed in funereal tones and with a shawl around her shoulders no matter what the weather, the woman dressed in constant anticipation of disaster. Grace stood awkwardly in the centre of the room, trying to hide the dropped gown behind her own skirts.

'Ma'am.' Mrs Boyle looked as if she'd just sucked a lemon down to the pith. 'It appears you have a guest arriving.'

'Yes. It appears I do.'

'I wasn't informed of this development.'

*Because I didn't know about it!* Grace knew she had to stop composing quick, acidic responses to the housekeeper in her head, but the compulsion was too strong to resist. 'I'm afraid I wasn't informed either, Mrs Boyle. There appears to have been some misunderstanding—a letter sent that arrived very late.'

'I see. Is it one of your cousins? Perhaps an aunt?'

'No. Not an aunt.' None of the wider relatives had come to see her in the castle, viewing her stay here as a sort of exile. It had hardly been a loss worth mourning. 'Not a relative at all. But the gentleman in question—'

'Gentleman?'

'... Yes.' It was important to speak as if this was a commonplace thing and not a staggering occurrence, not least because Mrs Boyle now looked as if two lemons had been sucked. Possibly three. 'A distant acquaintance. A Mr. Thornfall.'

'Thornfall. I haven't heard that name mentioned.'

'No. I wouldn't have any course to mention it. It appears he needs my help.'

Mrs Boyle's eyes narrowed. 'Your help?'

'Yes. He... he may have to stay here for some days.'

There were no lemons large enough to explain Mrs Boyle's horrified expression. 'Some days?'

'Yes. It's—it's quite difficult to explain.' Grace reached frantically for her reticule, rummaging around in it until she found Bertha's crumpled letter. 'Reading this will help. But—but we can easily pretend that we're not here, and he'll leave. No?'

'Have you taken leave of your senses, ma'am?'

'No. Yes—well. Perhaps.' Grace tried to give a carefree shrug, but knew as soon as she'd done it that it had only made her look insane. 'We're in no fit state to receive guests. Are we?'

'We're certainly not in a state to welcome guests. If I had been informed a little earlier of this unexpected development, I would have been able to make plans.' From Mrs Boyle's tone, it was clear that she

didn't believe a word of Grace's frantic excuse. 'But it's a sin to turn away someone at the door. As I'm sure you know.'

'There are mortal sins and smaller ones.' Discussing morality with Mrs Boyle only added another layer of unreality onto what was already a ludicrous day. 'Aren't there?'

'No, ma'am. A sin is a sin.' Mrs Boyle paused. 'I'll gather the maids and have them begin preparing things. Given that Mr. Brown has his day off, you'll have to greet Mr. Thornfall yourself.'

Of course she would. Given that the day was quickly becoming a nightmare, a giant bat was probably waiting in the entrance hall to devour her. Grace nodded, turning away from Mrs Boyle before any more of the woman's deeply disapproving stare could seep into her soul.

She walked down the stairs, tucking her hair behind her ears in a vain attempt to look elegant before irritatedly shaking her stray curls back into their previous positions. If Leo expected to be greeted with a smile and prettily arranged hair, it was a fantasy he could very quickly forget. As she walked into the enormous, draughty hall, home to several rotting crests on worm-eaten wood and a collection of furniture that didn't have a natural place in any of the other rooms, she tried to feel more anger than she did excitement.

She had every right to feel angry. She was being interrupted, no doubt due to a low deception, and would have to stop her painting for some days. Perhaps longer, given that Leo had never struck her as a gentleman of fashion no matter how much she'd secretly looked at him when on the Marton Estate. But despite knowing that all she should feel was fury, her body still leapt at the chance to be close to Mr. Thornfall.

But she was an artist. She would obey her higher self, her spirit, and let her rebellious body do what it would without paying attention to it. She heaved open the door of the castle, the smaller one built into the much larger door, and stood with arms folded as she glared out at the softly waving heather.

Soon came the sound of Leo's carriage. Then came footsteps, only one set; had he come without a valet? A ridiculous mistake, especially if he hoped to become a gentleman.

Grace looked down at the flagstones, trying to breathe. Before she could recover her sense of self, a shadow fell across the threshold.

She looked up. How could she not?

Leo practically tripped over the doorstep, all limbs and tousled hair. Grace stood in the centre of the hall, not quite knowing what to do with her arms, waiting impatiently for the man to look up and notice her.

When he did, the feeling was electric. Just as it always was. His

dark eyes burning into hers, making her feel nakedly vulnerable in a way that no other man had ever managed to accomplish.

Lord, he was beautiful. She'd paint him in every light, every colour, if she could. But she couldn't, and Leo shouldn't be here, and—and oh, now fury was bleeding into that precious feeling, marring it, and that anger was almost a relief.

'Miss Fellowes.' Leo bowed with a singular lack of elegance. If he was to become a true gentleman that would have to change—but damn it, she wasn't already going to start considering his self-improvement. 'Forgive me. I was expecting—'

'A butler. I know.' She had to sound frosty. Alas, she was out of practice; Grace cleared her throat, folding her arms. 'Mr. Thornfall. Before we begin any sort of pleasantries, I must tell you in no uncertain terms that your presence here is entirely unexpected.'

'I—I beg your pardon?'

'There has been either a terrible misunderstanding or a case of active deception.' It was obviously the latter, but Leo's shocked expression spurred her to be kinder. 'I assume the former. The letter explaining your situation arrived this morning, and here you are now. There has been no time at all to prepare.'

'Truly?'

'Yes.' Now his crestfallen look only spurred her anger. 'Why would I lie about it?'

'I didn't mean to imply any sort of—'

'I know. But now you're here, expecting to be made a gentleman, and I've had no time whatsoever to prepare a course of study. I have no idea how much work needs to be done—work that has been heaped upon my shoulders without any warning or any request on my part. In truth, everything is chaos.'

It was the longest conversation she and Leo had ever shared. She'd imagined all the things she'd say to him many times, but had never come close to the sad, painful reality.

Well. Nothing to be done about it. She turned away from Leo, his shocked stare hot on the back of her neck, and went to sit at the battered wooden table that sat by the large hearth.

She wasn't expecting Leo to follow her, but he did. He stood by the other chair, his expression a strange mixture of shock and stubbornness. 'They told me you'd welcome the work.'

'Excuse me?'

'Mr. Harrow and Marton. They told me that you were searching for something to do. A project of sorts.'

'Do I look as if I'm in need of a project, Mr. Thornfall?' Grace gestured wildly at the canvases stacked against the wall, each one depicting the landscape outside the castle walls in a different light.

‘Do I look bored? Suffering from a lack of time and space in which to exercise my time and talents?’

‘Of course not. I never meant to—’

‘I know you didn’t. But we are the victims of unforeseen circumstances at best, the silliest sort of trick at worst, and that’s irritating to me. Intensely irritating.’ Not to mention shameful enough to make her want to run and hide in the cellars, but that sentiment could be examined at another time. ‘Forgive me.’

‘There’s nothing to forgive.’ Leo’s gaze was fixed on the floor. Two bright scarlet points had appeared at the tops of his cheeks; Grace tried not to look at them as her heart cracked a little. ‘Nothing at all.’

As if choosing the most embarrassing moment possible, Mrs. Boyle entered with a large tray. She wobbled over the flagstones, her head held high, her expression making it obscenely clear that she had heard every word of what had transpired. ‘I took the liberty of bringing tea for your guest, ma’am.’

‘Thank you, Mrs. Boyle.’ She’d strangle the woman if she thought she could get away with it. ‘Always a treasure.’

‘There are shortbread biscuits.’

‘Thank you. How lovely.’

Mrs Boyle set the tray down on the table. With great deliberation, as if arranging precious jewels to attract the light, she slowly set out saucers, teacups and plates. Grace waited, practically vibrating with annoyance, every remaining ounce of strength dedicated to not looking at Leo.

Eventually, after an untold number of minutes, Mrs Boyle gave a lordly nod of her head. ‘I trust you’ll be satisfied, ma’am.’

*I never asked for any tea or biscuits!* ‘Deeply, Mrs Boyle.’

‘And I’ll be in the east wing if you need me. Dusting.’

‘How useful to know.’

‘The vases in the east wing haven’t been dusted in far too long. Eliza has never done a good job of it.’

‘Well, I’m sure you’ll teach her to be more attentive.’ Perhaps the woman would leave the room if she threw cushions at her. ‘In fact, I have no doubt.’

Mrs Boyle gave another nod, followed by a deeply condescending look in Leo’s direction, and left the room as slowly as she had arrived.

Lord, she could murder someone. Throw a biscuit across the room, at least. But as Grace clenched her fists, trying to control her rage, Leo broke into a sudden, embarrassed smile.

It was like seeing the sun in the middle of a storm. Breathtaking. Grace’s fury faded away, replaced with something entirely more complicated.

‘Is she your housekeeper?’ Leo reached out, picking up a

shortbread biscuit from the plate on the tray.

'She's been the housekeeper here since I was a child. She doesn't seem to age.'

'It must be difficult keeping house here.' Leo ate the biscuit as if he hadn't seen food for weeks. Another habit that would need correction—but here she was, already making a list of things that needed improvement. 'Very difficult.'

'Not really. Everything's falling to pieces and there's no money to stop the decay, so Mrs Boyle is meant to dust things until the roof falls in. And take care of me, of course, during my stay here.'

'Yes.' Another biscuit vanished. How a man of such athletic build managed to eat quite so many biscuits was a mystery. 'Because of the letter to the papers. That's why you're here, I assume.'

Grace held her breath. She took a sip of tea in a vain attempt to keep calm as Leo took yet another biscuit.

She only spoke of the letter with her friends. Arabella, Bertha, Rose and Susan had all taken the same leap as she had, declaring to all of London that they would reject the bonds of matrimony and instead pursue lives of creative fulfilment. The fact that both Arabella and Bertha had both married since meant remarkably little; they all still, in some strange way, considered themselves unfit for the common sort of marriage. But when it came to discussing the letter outside of their small, intimate circle, Grace had never found anyone who could speak of it without mockery or shame—not even her own parents.

Leo had said it in such a matter-of-fact way. As if what she had chosen to do was perfectly normal. She took another, deeper gulp of tea, a strange thrill of satisfaction warming her. 'Yes. Exactly.'

'And do you think you'll return? To London, I mean.'

'I don't know.' She had never been asked the question—hadn't even asked herself. In the castle it was easy to lose all sense of time, all idea of a future. 'When I've painted my masterpiece, I think.'

'It already looks as if you've painted masterpieces.'

'Thank you.' She pushed away the pleasurable glow Leo's words gave her. 'At least I won't have to teach you how to give compliments.'

'Oh, no. I think you'll have to.' Leo took yet another biscuit, devoured it, then finished his tea with one gulp. 'I would have told you if they were terrible.' He turned to the canvases. 'But they're not.'

Grace couldn't help but laugh. The sound echoed through the draughty entrance hall, making everything seem so much brighter.

How long had it been since she'd laughed? A long time. The last occasion had been on the Marton estate, no doubt about it—and it had very probably been due to something Leo had said.



It was dangerous, him being here. Perilous to her work, her concentration—her very sense of self. Because the more she looked at Leo, listened to him speak, the more she wanted to see.

‘If you’ve read the letter, then you’re aware of my situation.’ Leo paused. ‘Without boring you with the particulars, you know that my sister’s happiness depends on me showing the world that I can be a gentleman. I know that even with a lifetime of work, I’ll never be a masterpiece in this respect—but do you think, with enough work on my part, I can become a serviceable gentleman before the Berriwick Ball?’

*You’re already a masterpiece.* Grace blinked, briefly unable to form words.

She reached for a biscuit. Leo reached for one at the same time; their fingers touched. Grace flinched away as if she’d been scalded; Leo almost dropped his teacup, catching it just before it fell.

It was far too dangerous to have him here. To feel this much, want this much, when work needed to be done. She would make him a gentleman of fashion as quickly and thoroughly as possible, then send him back to London before she completely lost her head.

‘Well?’ Leo stared. ‘Is it possible?’

‘Yes.’ To let him down would be the worst thing in the world. ‘Of course.’

‘Miss Fellowes.’ There was that smile again. ‘I can’t thank you enough.’

Perhaps she could brush against his fingers again, reaching for another biscuit. Perhaps she could simply lean closer to him. Or perhaps she could wrap her hand around the end of Leo’s badly-tied cravat, pull him closer, and kiss him with all the pent-up longing that had accumulated ever since they first met.

A distant crash sounded. Grace jumped, only to realise she had been leaning closer to Leo.

‘Well.’ Leo sounded oddly breathless. ‘I don’t think the maids have learned how to treat the vases properly.’

‘I imagine not. I’m not sure why Mrs Boyle thinks you’re going to go and inspect the vases.’

‘I’ll be happy to study them in my spare time here.’

‘You won’t have much time to spare.’ Now she could be business-like; the crash had interrupted her dizzying train of thought. ‘I can start by telling you that a gentleman of fashion can’t eat three biscuits in less than three minutes. In fact, it’s best to demonstrate no appetites of any kind until you’ve seen someone else demonstrate them.’

‘Ah. I see.’

‘My parents insist on sending me every book related to new manners—I haven’t touched them, but they’ll no doubt be useful to

you. I suggest you spend tomorrow reading them, preparing notes, and then ask me for information on any facts that remain mysterious to you.'

'I see. Thank you.'

'And a tailor must be brought here for fittings. A marquess summons nearby as well—he can furnish me with new details concerning a gentleman's habits, just to make sure that nothing escapes us.'

'I can't thank you enough, Miss Fellowes. Truly.'

'Don't thank me yet.' Grace stood; Leo hurriedly stood as well. No time for pleasantries, not if they'd lead to more intense moments of connection. 'I'll go and make a list. You must go to the library and begin reading—the books you need are by the window, under a pile of dust sheets.'

'Once again, thank you.'

'Stop thanking me. Please.'

There it was again. Another tense, white-hot moment as their eyes met that made all words seem utterly irrelevant. Grace dropped her gaze, biting her lip as a wave of pained desire flooded her.

It wasn't Leo's fault. This was her own foolishness, her own lack of self-control. If she remembered her true self, an artist dedicated to her art, then she would be able to teach Leo everything she knew without losing her heart in the process.

'I must paint until sundown today.' She tried to make her voice gentler. 'I will be able to dedicate my spare hours to you tomorrow. Mrs Boyle will prepare your dinner.'

'I see. This would be another point where thanks are required, but you've told me I mustn't.'

'You can thank me tomorrow, when something has been done.' It still hurt to turn away from him, even though it was the only sensible thing to do.

'Until tomorrow, Miss Fellowes. And thank you. Even though I'm not supposed to.'

It had to be a curse, feeling so much for a man so maddening. With an awkward nod of her head, Grace left the room as quickly as she could.

Grace wasn't a deep sleeper at the best of times. The castle was so silent compared to London, its creaks and groans nothing compared to the constant sounds of a street at night, that she ended up tossing and turning at the slightest provocation. Now, with Leo in the same building even though he was an entire wing away, the entire night contained so little sleep that the morning felt faintly unreal as it arrived.

At least it was an excuse to avoid seeing him at the breakfast table. Not that Mrs Boyle seemed to want such a development; Grace's usual breakfast tray was deposited outside her bedroom door at the usual hour with a definite thud, as if warning her not to step beyond the threshold. Grace ate her roll, drank her tea, and tried to find excuses to stay in her bedroom for as long as humanly possible.

Alas, her body wouldn't listen to her. Knowing that Leo was somewhere nearby—that he was walking where she walked, looking at what she looked at, perhaps thinking about her—sent a hot, hasty jolt of excitement through her, as if a candle had been lit and pressed to parts of her body that she spent most of her time ignoring. It was a pleasure so frustrating that it bordered on pain; Grace buried her face in her pillow, torn between pushing the feeling away and welcoming it further.

No. She couldn't feed this; it would only invite disaster. Ignoring the prickles of sensation at the base of her stomach, the delicate flickers of pleasure at the tips of her breasts, she threw herself out of bed with so much vigour that she almost upset her breakfast tray, saving it from being tipped onto the floor at the last moment.

When she finally summoned up enough courage to look for Leo, after a long period of dressing and shaking away any latent energy in her body, he was nowhere to be seen. He wasn't in the library, or the disused room full of bat droppings that had once served as a study. Grace bit her lip, torn between worry at where he'd gone and irritation that she was worried at all.

A rustle of pages came from the end of the corridor, where the ballroom was. Quite why Leo would be in the abandoned ballroom, the room with the roof in its very worst state, she didn't know—but annoyingly, she was happy to have found him.

She tiptoed to the end of the corridor and pushed open the door that led to the ballroom. Leo was sitting in one corner of the vast space, seemingly at ease on the flagstones, his nose buried deep in the largest and most intimidating etiquette book in Grace's collection.

He looked so naturally himself when he was learning. Grace had seen him sometimes at the Marton estate in the library, lost to the wider world on a private journey of intellectual discovery, and the urge to keep looking at him grew stronger every time she did it. She coughed, suddenly unsure of herself, as Leo looked up with a start.

'Miss Fellowes.' As he stood up, hurriedly bowing, he knocked the book he'd been reading to the floor. Grace stood still, not quite knowing where to look as Leo picked it up, his spectacles almost slipping off of his nose. 'Good morning.'

'Good morning.' Lord, she'd never had to sustain a pleasant conversation with him for more than a moment. At the Marton estate,

there had always been a friend or servant to blessedly interrupt such an awkward event. 'I trust you slept well.'

'Oh, yes. Absolutely. The bed is very comfortable.' Leo paused. 'And there's a wonderful variety of spiders that have made webs in the corners. I counted at least four species.'

Was he attempting to make some sort of witty point? An insult? Grace tried to think of a suitable retort, before realising with a queer shiver of tenderness that Leo thought he was complimenting her. From his open expression, his keen smile, he genuinely thought that knowing how many spiders were in the castle would gratify her.

'I'm glad you found something to occupy yourself, at least.' A man who found joy and intellectual excitement in dark corners full of spiders was a rare creature. Rare and captivating. 'Perhaps you should make an inventory.'

'I wish I had the time. I really do. I've already seen so many parts of this building that I'd love to study in depth.' Leo made a slightly shamefaced gesture in the direction of the pile of books. 'But there are already so many books on manners, and I only have a certain amount of time to read them all thoroughly.'

'I'm sure only three of the ten will be truly useful to you.'

'I have to read all of them. I don't want to miss a single detail.' Leo rubbed his brow. 'Even though I'm in sore need of a little time away from them. Perhaps I'll go for a walk.'

The idea of Leo walking alone over the melancholy, heather-filled landscape was an oddly arresting one. Grace tried to push away the thought of him in a greatcoat: how dashing he'd look. How sad. 'I wasn't expecting such an early admission of defeat from a scholar of such repute.'

'I'm not of any repute. Not yet.'

'Hardly. I saw your name in one of the latest keynote speeches at the Royal Society.' Oh, Lord—why had she said that? Why had she admitted it? 'At least, I thought I did.'

'Oh, no. That was me.' Leo blinked. 'I didn't think anyone I knew would see that.'

Well. If there was any way to make this conversation even more embarrassing, it wasn't immediately apparent. Grace bit her lip, hoping that the ground would open up beneath her and swallow her.

'Anyway.' Leo had clearly noticed her discomfort. Grace couldn't decide if she was reassured or even more uncomfortable. 'I suppose you're right. I must attack the material with more spirit—but it's different to my usual fare. I sit for more than half an hour and want to sleep.'

'Have you absorbed any of it?'

'Oh, yes. I now know a tremendous amount about cutlery, new

stocking styles and the best pleasure garden attractions.’ Leo blinked. ‘All information I never expected to know.’

‘I’ve quite enjoyed forgetting all of those things. Now my brain is full of paint, pencil and fresh air.’

‘Apart from the fresh air, that sounds wonderful.’ Leo paused. ‘If I am to walk, perhaps I’ll walk through the castle and make notes on the different archways I’ve seen.’

‘And that’s more interesting than cutlery?’

‘Wildly so.’

‘Then I fear you’ll be distracted.’ Just being near him heightened the giddy, impetuous feeling that almost blanketed her intense awkwardness. ‘You should do something active that relates to your current course of study.’

‘Not bowing. I’ve practised bowing all morning—my head’s still spinning.’

‘No. Something else. Like—like dancing.’

Dancing? Had she truly just said *dancing*? No, she couldn’t have, it was too ridiculous for words. But Leo was looking at her in clear surprise, his eyes so warm and intelligent, and...

... oh, no. She had said it. Now she had to live with the consequences.

‘Yes.’ Leo looked down at the books, then looked back at her. ‘I suppose that would combine physical exertion with mental stimulation. And dancing will be one of the most important skills on display at the ball.’

‘Quite. If you wish to make a good impression, you’ll need to practice.’

‘It’s not as if I’ve never danced. I know the steps in theory—it’s rather mathematical, in the end, which is always intriguing.’ Leo blinked. ‘But as for practice—’

‘The mathematical side can only take one so far. At a certain point, theory must evolve into practical application.’

‘Then... then shall we dance? Not that I’m asking—I mean, if you think a little time spent dancing would be the best way for me to refresh my mind before diving back into my volumes, I can only—’

‘You shall dance, Mr. Thornfall. For a very little while. Just enough time to give you back your appetite for reading.’ If she didn’t set strict limits on what she had started, all boundaries would crumble. ‘Now—let me think about what sort of dance is most useful for you to learn.’

She walked into the centre of the ballroom. The hole in the roof let in a shaft of sunlight; it shone on the faded flagstones, blinding Grace for a brief, spectacular moment before it faded.

Behind her, in the silence, she could hear Leo breathing.

What dance could she teach him? What dances could she remember? Only the silly, stiff ones that had been drummed into her as a girl, the ones that meant draughty country gatherings and the omnipresent odour of beer and sweat. Then the dances she had been taught for her coming out, but even those were out of date by now; she would need something more modern, something that would cause a sensation.

Something that would allow her to touch him. Anything.

‘There is a new dance that is becoming quite the fashion.’ Her throat was dry. ‘Older gentlemen won’t learn it, but most gentlemen your age will seek it out.’

‘A new dance? I didn’t know they were still making new ones.’

‘Fashions change. No-one wishes to dance the quadrilles of previous years.’

‘Why don’t older gentlemen wish to dance this new dance?’

‘Because they consider it too scandalous. Far too scandalous.’ It was important to speak with a sort of clinical detachment; it was the only way to avoid being nervous. ‘The waltz.’

‘I see. A waltz?’

‘A waltz.’

‘And—and why is it so scandalous?’

‘Because you’re allowed to touch more than your partner’s hand. Any gentleman of any standing has to know how to dance a waltz.’

‘Really? Such a new style?’

‘Exactly. If it’s new, if it’s the fashion, you must know about it.’

‘But gentlemen and ladies must—’

‘Touch.’ Grace swallowed in the short, piercing silence that followed. ‘I know.’

Quite how she was meant to teach Leo without touching him, she didn’t know. Using Mrs Boyle as a stand-in was impossible—both she and Leo would probably die of laughter—and having him wheel about the room like a marionette, holding onto nothing, would probably achieve little more than making him more clumsy. She stood in the middle of the room, one hand on her chin, staring at Leo and waiting for a better solution to present itself.

Nothing came. So much for the inspiration that was meant to come to every artist in times of need. Suppressing a short sigh, she took a step forward. ‘Hands out.’

‘Hands where?’

‘One up, one to the side. No—not like a nutcracker. Like this.’ She demonstrated; Leo obediently copied her movements. ‘Exactly.’

‘And my partner...’

‘Stands here.’ Grace held her breath as she moved forward. ‘Like—like this.’

She slipped her hand into Leo's, moving his other hand to rest against her waist. A shiver ran through Leo that she could feel in her own body: a sudden, electric jolt, as if a tiny bolt of lightning had moved through the both of them.

'There. You see?' Now her voice was depressingly business-like, as if she were an elderly matron instructing a young girl how to walk correctly. She had to be practical, severely so; the alternative was simply standing still and feeling this, the astonishing sensation of holding Leo's hand for the first time. The feel of his hand on her waist, his palm so strong even if it trembled. How could a man be so nervous about dancing? 'Very easy.'

'Speak for yourself.'

'I'm no expert at this particular dance.'

'You behave very much as if you are.'

'I behave as if I'm an expert at everything. It confuses people enough to allow one to do as one pleases.' Grace tried to slow her breathing; holding Leo's hand was making her dizzy. 'But I know enough about this dance to teach it.'

'I didn't realise you were such a gifted dancer.'

'I'm not.' She hadn't danced with anyone since the letter to the papers. If one wished to make a statement, one had to keep reinforcing the original point. 'But I've watched so many people do it now. I can mimic it perfectly.'

It was only as she finished the sentence that she realised how achingly sad her words had been. She looked down, which didn't help; all she could see were Leo's thighs tightly encased in breeches, the shine of his boots. Leo didn't respond, but his silence was less awkward than usual. If anything, it was gentle.

'Well. Let's begin.' Her voice had grown husky; she cleared her throat, all too aware of Leo's hand on her waist. 'I'll take the lead first. All you have to do is close your eyes and follow.'

'Close my eyes?'

'You'll learn it more quickly if you're not observing it, analysing it. It has to be felt before it's studied.'

'All right.'

'Are you sure you'll allow me to take the lead?'

'Of course.' Leo frowned. 'Why wouldn't I?'

'Most gentlemen would protest.'

'I'm not most gentlemen. And—and you're not most ladies. Not to say that you're—'

'It's quite all right.' This conversation needed to end as quickly as possible, or she'd die of embarrassment without having taken a single step. 'Now. Eyes closed. Let's begin.'

She'd imagined herself dancing a waltz more than once as she'd

watched from the sidelines, losing herself in the ebb and flow of the movements. Despite her determination to remain single, to never be bound to a gentleman or financially dependent on the whims of a potential tyrant, there was a romance to the waltz that made it so very different to other dances. So easy to watch from the wallflower section of any ballroom, listen to the music, and dream.

‘One, two, three.’ She heard her own voice as if from far away. The first movement was smoother than she had imagined; Leo’s eyes were tightly closed, a line of concentration between his brows. ‘One, two, three, one, two, three...’

It wasn’t the most elegant waltz in the world. Leo was an obedient student, but he had a tendency to stumble when moving backwards; there were one or two moments when he gripped Grace’s waist tightly, as if he was about to pull her to him, and that meant a moment of steadying herself on her feet before continuing. She was a good keeper of time, but sometimes one couldn’t help counting faster or slower—or losing time completely when one remembered, against all logic and reason, that she was holding Leo Thornfall in her arms.

But the dance went on. On and on, no need for music, just Grace’s increasingly careless counting and the rhythm that the air took around them, encouraging them, keeping them going. The invisible sparks that flew between their bodies, their clasped palms; had she ever felt so alive before, quite so full of sunlight and starlight and sheer fire? Had she ever been quite so invested in leading someone, guiding them, moving them from step to step with her words, her body, the touch of her hand...

... and now they were standing in the middle of the vast, draughty ballroom, a sparrow chirping through the hole in the roof, and they were still without Grace really knowing why. Still, looking at one another, panting slightly from the exertion. Their hands were still clasped, Leo’s palm still tight against her waist; Leo was staring, close, leaning closer.

‘Ma’am?’ Miss Boyle’s voice sounded from the corridor. ‘Are you in the ballroom?’

*Christ.* Grace sprang away, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear in a vain attempt to find something to do with her hands. Leo blinked; he looked marooned, far from any aid. ‘Yes, Miss Boyle! One moment!’

‘I require your attention in the kitchens. You must help me judge some mutton.’

‘Of course, Mrs Boyle. One moment.’

A significant pause, then the silence that meant an empty corridor. Grace held a hand to her chest, trying to catch her breath.

‘And that, Mr. Thornfall, is a waltz. A fine dance.’ Quite why she sounded like an elderly fisherman explaining a carp lake to a passing



traveller, she didn't know. The only thing more embarrassing would be slapping him on the back; she clenched her fists, unwilling to allow herself to do something so stupid. 'As you can see, it's simple enough.'

'Yes.' Leo nodded. He'd gone very red indeed. 'Very simple.'

This was the worst possible scenario. She was completely unable to keep her hands to herself; she would have to spend the day running up and down the castle stairs, or persuading one of the deeply lazy kitchen dogs to go on a long, brisk walk to one of the stone circles. Anything to keep her self-control. 'And now, I think, it's time for you to return to your books.'

'Yes. It is.' Leo paused. 'Unless—'

'Unless?'

'Unless, in your esteemed opinion, there are other new dances that I need to be taught.'

He sounded so humble. So completely sure that what he was asking for would be impossible. But the faint light of hope in Leo's eyes, the lower tone to his voice, allowed Grace to briefly dream of the impossible.

'If you don't wish to return to your books, it behoves you to visit the tailor as soon as possible. There'll be no need to make an appointment if you tell them you've come from the castle.' She would have to kill her dreams, and quickly, before they became unbearable. 'Best that you go before lunch. He'll wish to measure you unfed, to get the lines of your coats correct.'

'Oh. I see.' Disappointment shone in Leo's eyes, then abruptly faded. 'That would indeed make sense.'

'I know it makes sense. Otherwise I wouldn't have said it.' Now she was being needlessly hostile in a futile attempt to push him away. This was why she had written that letter to the papers—this grotesque push and pull, this desire that weakened her, could never take precedence to her painting. 'I will see you this evening, Mr. Thornfall. Maybe.'

'Until this evening, Miss Fellowes.' Leo bowed low. Even though she was the one walking away, Grace couldn't help but feel as if the man had gained some sort of power from this exchange. 'Maybe.'

It was a positive relief to send Leo off to the village tailor that afternoon. Flanked with a deeply disapproving Mrs Boyle, he had waved to her before setting off in the carriage; Grace hadn't waved back, not knowing what to do. Eventually she'd nodded awkwardly, as if she were a gentleman addressing a business partner, and scuttled back into the castle without looking back.

She hadn't gone to greet him when he'd returned. Mrs Boyle spent the rest of the afternoon either in the same room as her or the room

next door; evidently her suspicions had been raised, although how Grace couldn't tell. Either way, after hours of dutifully painting a small vase of heather and listening to Mrs Boyle sing traditional songs while instructing the maids on how best to scrub the floor in the next room, she felt fit for nothing more than a bowl of vegetable soup and bed.

Something in her wouldn't let her sleep, though. Something kept her wandering the castle in her gown, not wishing to call the maid for the usual ritual of undressing, bathing, hair-brushing. Something intimately connected to the memory of Leo's hand in hers, the way he'd trembled when she'd touched him; it was as if a beacon had been lit, shining from a great distance, and she had to search for it.

There was no point trying to listen to reason. In moments like this, one had to give into one's muse. Grace gave into it, to the want that had filled her body, and didn't protest when it led her to the library.

A fire was crackling. She could hear it through the door. Holding her breath, pushing down the anticipation that leapt in her like sunrise, she pushed it open.

Leo was reading again. This time he appeared to have made himself at home, rather than perching in a corner of an abandoned room like a feral cat in danger of being shooed out of doors. He sat in front of the fire, a careless tangle of limbs, intently focused on a page with a soft, dreaming expression that made Grace suspect he wasn't reading a word of what was written down.

Was he thinking of her? A wrong thought to have, a terrible one, but it crossed her mind all the same. If he was thinking of her with even half as much intensity as she was thinking of him, the room would very probably be set ablaze.

His spectacles hung on the very tip of his nose. Grace imagined pushing them up, or taking them off entirely, and a soft sigh escaped her before she could stop herself.

She held her breath. Leo's gaze didn't waver from the page. Acutely aware of her own body, of how loudly her heart was beating, Grace looked around for something to distract her.

A large silver tray had been placed on the table closest to the door. On it stood an array of vintages: brandy, whisky, and a very dusty old bottle containing what could only be Mrs Boyle's famous blackberry wine. Grace stared at it, briefly jealous that a guest had been offered a more luxurious welcome than she herself had upon arriving at the castle so many weeks ago, and reached for the wine and a glass before she could stop herself.

Her hand trembled as she poured a large glass. She drank quickly, suppressing a gasp as the force of the liquid hit her; Mrs Boyle's wine was known locally for its potency, but the fire in the after-taste of this

particular vintage meant it had to be one of the housekeeper's most potent bottles.

The glass clinked as she put it back on the tray. Leo turned his head; Grace curtseyed, hoping the wine hadn't reddened her lips past the point of respectability.

'Miss Fellowes.' Leo rushed to his feet, bowing. A half-empty glass of brandy stood on the floor behind him; perhaps that had contributed to the slightly unfocused look in his eyes. 'Forgive me for not noticing your arrival.'

'Not at all.' Had she really waltzed with him just this morning? Now she felt as clumsy as a newborn foal, incapable of taking more than a few steps. Perhaps more wine would help. 'Did the tailor do his job well?'

'Given that I rarely visit tailors, I can't judge with any real expertise. The last time I was made to visit a tailor was when I needed things for Cambridge—things that no-one saw, of course, because I spent almost every waking hour in the library.' Leo shrugged. 'But he was very attentive. I've been measured from head to foot, and have been told a great many things about different types of cloth that I've endeavoured to remember. Should I tell you about them?'

'I wouldn't be able to correct you, even if you did make mistakes.' She chose her dresses for their ability to withstand smeared oil paint and spilled cups of tea, not beauty. 'I'm glad it was useful to you.'

'It was.' Leo bashfully touched the knotted white cloth at his neck. 'He even taught me how to correctly tie my cravat.'

So he had. She had been too focused on his eyes, on the rise and fall of his chest, to notice. 'Excuse me. I should have seen it.'

'There was no need for you to notice it.'

'I'm an artist. I take it upon myself to notice everything.'

'And I'm a scholar, so I must classify everything. Including types of cloth.'

'I have dedicated my life entirely to my art.'

'I dedicated my life entirely to my studies, before Alice's letter changed everything.' Leo paused. 'It was a pure life.'

'Exactly. Rich and pure. As if you drink wine while everyone else drinks water.'

'And peaceful. There's a level of contentment with solitary work that one simply doesn't find in company.'

'Rich, pure, peaceful...'

'... Lonely.'

Grace blinked, turning to Leo fully. Leo's cheeks blushed a bright, vivid red; he turned away, staring at the fire.

'As it turns out, the life of a fashionable gentlemen is considerably more murky. There are ever so many things that a gentleman must

know how to do. That—that it behoves a man of a certain level to know.’ He stroked his finger along one of the spines of the books; Grace watched him, noting the lightness of his touch. ‘I can’t believe I managed to avoid so much.’

‘Neither can I. Did your parents give you no education in these matters?’

‘My mother and father are of a very particular breed. They’re the sort of people who expect every other soul on earth to understand what would satisfy them, without ever actually telling anyone what they would find satisfying. A most confounding habit, and one from which my sister and I weren’t made at all exempt.’

‘So they expected you to become a gentleman of fashion, but never actually informed you of their expectations until it was far too late?’

‘Exactly. I thought for a very long time that they understood my desire to be a scholar.’ Leo looked down at his brandy glass. ‘Silly me.’

For a long, vulnerable moment, pity filled Grace’s heart. Her own desires, both when it came to painting and remaining unmarried, were certainly viewed with both confusion and consternation by her mother and father—but they had never shied away from telling her in the end. There had been many uncomfortable exchanges of words, but she had always known where she stood with them. Always.

Poor Leo. Forced to fight his way through a thicket of expectations, not knowing where to turn. Poor Leo with his pale, grave face, so handsome in this light—with his broad shoulders, his hands that could stroke gently, so gently.

She had drunk far too much wine. Miss Boyle’s blackberry wine was delicious, but far too potent. Thanks to a single, half-finished glass of it, she was already behaving in a way that couldn’t be anything other than unwise.

But it felt too good to stop. Far, far too good. Here in the library with Leo, the crackling fire filling the air with the warm scent of wood-smoke and the distant stars shining through the large mullioned windows, she felt better than she had in months.

It was the tension in the air. The calm before a storm; a storm that she’d always been afraid to shape the contours of. But now, with the wine still heating her throat and Leo looking at her out of the corner of his eye, as if he couldn’t quite believe she was real, she wasn’t afraid anymore.

‘Forgive me.’ Leo put his brandy glass down on one of the bookshelves. ‘I’ve made the evening morose.’

‘You haven’t. Not in the least. And we’ve made great strides already, I think.’

‘Bowling and conversing? One dance? Hardly advanced work.’

‘Without those three things, you won’t be given the chance to

demonstrate your other talents.'

'Talents that I have yet to develop. How to compliment someone, how to dance more dances without making a complete fool of myself. How to... how to flirt.'

*Flirt.* He'd said it; she hadn't dreamed it. And he was looking at her fully now, his dark eyes full of a courage that she'd never seen in him before.

'Flirt.' The word felt rusty in her mouth from lack of use. 'Yes. You will need to learn how to flirt. It's a very important skill.'

'I'm—I'm very glad indeed that you agree.' Leo moved closer. The shadows from the fire flickered over his features, softening them. 'It feels necessary for me to learn. Crucial, in fact.'

She should move away. She should leave the room. But the wine had loosened both her inhibitions and her tongue, making it the easiest thing in the world to move towards him.

'And why does it feel so crucial to learn that particular skill, Mr. Thornfall?' She could murmur her words now. They were close enough. 'To flirt?'

'I'm ashamed to say it.' A faint blush appeared on Leo's cheeks. Grace watched the colour bloom, fighting the urge to lick her lips as he continued. 'Forget I said anything.'

'I don't want to forget.'

'It's a foolish desire.'

'I can't judge its foolishness or not if you don't tell me why you desire what you desire.'

'Trust my judgement.'

'And why should I do that?'

'All right. I... I desire to know what happens *after* one has flirted.' Leo's cheeks were scarlet now. 'I desire that very much.'

Was he leaning forward, or was she? Perhaps they both were, the foot or so between them slowly but surely vanishing.

Leo's lips touched hers. The question of who had leaned first became meaningless, utterly meaningless, as Grace sank into the kiss with a swift, fierce sigh.

She couldn't hold back, couldn't show any restraint as warm sparks filled her body. Some deep, tightly-repressed part of her had been waiting for Leo's lips, begging for them since the first day they'd met, and they were exactly as honey-sweet as she'd imagined. Sweet and soft and skilled, somehow, despite his clear lack of experience, coaxing pleasure from her with the smallest movement of his head. As he deepened the kiss by degrees, cupping her face with a hand that trembled slightly, Grace fought the embarrassing urge to moan.

She pulled away, gasping. Leo stared down at her, evidently worried. 'Did I do something—'

‘No.’ The fire in her was damned near uncontrollable. All from a single kiss—did the man not know the power he had? ‘You did nothing wrong. Absolutely nothing.’

‘Then why have we stopped?’

An infinitely reasonable question. Grace closed her eyes for a moment, trying to regain command of herself before continuing.

‘Is this to be a lesson?’ There was no real other way to say it. ‘A lesson out of order, of course, given the traditional place kissing is given after conversing, dancing and flirting, but—’

‘Yes. A lesson. Of course it’s a lesson.’ Leo’s face betrayed nothing but frank openness. ‘It... it couldn’t be anything else.’

Another perfectly reasonable thing to say. Quite why it caused such a sudden, intense burst of disappointment in Grace’s chest, she didn’t want to think about. She nodded quickly, not wanting Leo to see the sadness in her eyes. ‘Quite right.’

‘So... what should I do now?’

His hand was still cupping her face, his touch fuelling desires that cancelled out all thought. Grace half-turned her head, kissing his knuckle; a shiver ran through Leo’s palm.

‘Do as you did before, please.’ At least her voice had regained a little of its power. ‘But more. And for longer.’

Leo evidently didn’t need telling twice. His mouth covered hers again, this time more powerfully than before, a sound leaving his lips that was halfway between a growl and a sigh.

Now the sparks were back, and stronger still. Every brush of Leo’s lips felt wickedly delicious, edged with brandy and a shy delight that only made Grace want to kiss him more. She wrapped her arms around his neck, shivering at the sensation of her forearms sliding along the patch of bare skin above Leo’s shirt, and stroked the roof of his mouth with her tongue without thinking for an instant about how shocking a thing it was to do.

This time the sound Leo made was a definite growl. His hands moved to her waist, holding her tightly; Grace sighed with pleasure, leaning even more deeply into the kiss. When Leo’s tongue brushed against hers, his own exploration more subtle than hers had been but no less explosive, she arched her back as the feeling shot through every one of her nerves.

It was embarrassing how ready she was. Ready for his mouth, his tongue, his tight grip on her waist. Her nipples were already aching, stiff and swollen beneath her gown, the meeting of her thighs slick and wet in a way that she’d only ever managed to achieve with her own fingers. If this was how people felt when they kissed, it was a wonder every ball didn’t end with acts that would set the scandal sheets ablaze.

‘Forgive me, Miss Fellowes.’ Leo sounded much less ashamed of himself now. His low, hoarse tone was very different to his usual voice, but thoroughly agreeable all the same. ‘But I have a question regarding the lesson.’

‘Ask it.’

‘I have a—a most tremendous wish to press you against the nearest wall. Is that normal? Should I act upon it?’

‘A resounding yes to both.’ She had no idea if it was normal or not, but she certainly wanted him to do it—preferably as quickly as possible. ‘You’re doing splendidly.’

Leo’s quick nod sent another shower of sparks through her. With a strength that she’d never imagined him possessing, he pressed her against the tapestried wall of the library until she arched her back in shocked, craven delight.

Now she could feel Leo’s body, the force of his grip, the taut lines of his thighs against hers. His kisses were stronger here, deeper—as if he had needed this for a long time, a very long time, and the knowledge of all the opportunities missed made Grace kiss Leo all the harder in response.

She gasped as Leo moved his hands to her breasts. His touch was tentative, but curious; how strange it was to feel his deft, scholarly fingers exploring her, pausing against her hardening nipples. When he slowly reached for the top of her bodice, stopping there as if unsure of what to do, Grace tugged it downward with an eagerness born of pure frustration.

It was as if the last rope holding her had been cut free, and she was floating. Nothing could ground her; she could bare her breasts for Leo, pull away her shift and cry out in ecstasy as his fingers touched her bare skin, and there was nothing anyone on earth could do to hold her back.

‘You feel beautiful.’ Leo’s fingers travelled slowly over the bare skin of her breasts, followed by a cautious kiss to her swollen, rosy nipple that had Grace biting her tongue to keep from crying out. ‘So beautiful.’

She had never cared about feeling beautiful before. She was an artist—the world existed for her to find beauty in it, not the other way around. But as Leo kissed his way along her bare breasts, his kisses growing longer and more lascivious, Grace realised with a start of surprise that she both felt beautiful and liked the feeling.

She was so wet between her legs. Wet in a way that compelled attention. As she opened her mouth, hardly knowing how to call attention to it, Leo put his hands beneath her buttocks and lifted her off of her feet.

‘Forgive me.’ He whispered in her ear. ‘I need to feel more of you.’

‘I know.’ Now they could push away her skirts. Now they could fit together in a way that flirted with ruin—but oh, it was far too good to stop.

She couldn’t hold back a sigh of pure need as Leo pressed himself against her again. She was open to him, legs splayed, but he drove himself against her as if he was desperate to know how she felt. Desperate to come as close to ruining her as he could.

‘Ask me to stop.’ Leo’s murmur in her ear only fed the fire at the base of her stomach. ‘Ask me to stop, and I’ll stop.’

‘I don’t want you to stop.’ It had taken what felt like centuries to arrive that this point, and she was damned if she would let it end now. ‘Don’t stop. Please.’

Leo’s fervent kiss at the base of her throat almost made her cry out. Then he moved his hips, the rigid outline of his cock brazen against her slit, and Grace couldn’t control the deep moan that left her lips.

This wasn’t exactly a sin. This was almost a sin, which was very different; different enough for no guilt to come and overwhelm her pleasure, dampen down the delicious storm of madness that came from the wine, Leo’s presence, Leo’s touch. Came from the way he held her tight against the wall, once again displaying a most unscholarly strength; his fingers were tight on her buttocks beneath her gown, keeping her there, keeping her open for him. He didn’t know what he was doing, neither did she—but the rhythm they were making together, little by little, already felt like the best kind of art. Their quick, desperate movements slowly altering, deepening, as Leo searched for her pleasure and found it.

‘Like that.’ She didn’t know if she was supposed to speak, but she spoke anyway. The slow, perfect grind of Leo’s hips, the way the rigid bulge in his breeches coaxed pleasure from her bud; that had to continue. ‘Like that.’

Leo nodded so ardently that his glasses slipped from his nose. Grace caught them before they hit the ground; Leo’s smile, the sudden intensity with which he kissed her, made her feel as if she’d done something far more significant. ‘Thank you.’

‘Not at all.’ She reached out, just about managing to place the spectacles on the nearest bookshelf. Leo placed a burning kiss to her throat as she let them drop. ‘Now, we—we can continue.’

They had to continue. She couldn’t live the rest of her life with this deep, unquenchable thirst at her very core. Grace reached behind Leo, gripping his buttocks in a wordless attempt to keep the movement going, keep the pleasure coming.

Now there was no tentativeness left, no clumsy exploration. The grind to Leo’s hips was almost animal; every stroke of his buckskin-



covered cock along her wet slit felt better, more brazen, more beautiful. Every brush against her bud, the tingling seat of her pleasure, felt as if he were breaking her apart and remaking her piece by piece. Grace bit her lip in agonised delight as she felt something building in her, an explosion of colour and light so devastating that she could barely begin to picture it.

‘Keep going.’ All she could do was wrap her arms around his neck, give herself over to him entirely. ‘Oh, God, keep going.’

Leo could apparently obey instructions to the letter. The grind of his hips grew deeper, less compromising; Grace buried her face in his shirt, unable to restrain a high, broken cry of pleasure as the whirlwind overcame her.

It was everything. It was wine-fuelled starlight cascading over her, making every part of her body shiver. It was touching something so awe-inspiring, so unquestionably divine, that merely to approach it was to risk the sweetest annihilation.

‘Oh, you.’ Leo’s voice was a dim, reverent murmur in her ear as she trembled in his arms, transfigured. ‘Oh, *you*.’

When Leo woke up, it was to an unusual feeling of contentment. Even though parts of him ached in thoroughly unusual ways, including his head—how much brandy had he drunk?—every muscle in his body was heavy, satisfied in ways that he’d never imagined feeling.

He was lying on something soft. The chaise longue in the library, then; why had he chosen to sleep on that, rather than going to bed? And the blanket covering him was so heavy...

... the blanket was breathing. Leo opened his eyes, biting his lip hard enough to hurt as he realised it was Grace.

God, she was softer than the chaise longue. Soft, delicate; even lying atop him she didn’t feel heavy. She felt right.

Grace shifted. Leo kept his lip firmly bitten, calling upon every ounce of self-control as her breasts rubbed against his chest.

They’d done impossible things the previous night. Things that he’d never thought brandy would call forth; he’d been hungry for her, mad for any ounce of pleasure he could give her. And Grace... she’d reciprocated.

What had that been? What did it mean?

Breathing as slowly and gently as he could, he wrapped his arms around her. He couldn’t squeeze her tightly; that would wake her, and when she woke there would be hell to pay. He would have to remember who he was, who she was, why he was here—oh, God, he wanted to do absolutely none of that.

All he wanted to do now was hold Grace in his arms, kiss the top

of her head as lightly as he could, and pretend that this was how it would be forever.

For several long, honeyed minutes, he existed outside of time. All that mattered was Grace's breathing, twinned with his own, and the glow of the dying fire. It didn't matter what the hour was, whether it was nearly morning or only an hour had passed; this was here and now, and he and Grace were together.

When Grace finally lifted her head, opening her dark eyes, it was hard to conceal the stab of disappointment. 'Where are—'

'In the library. Remember?'

'... Yes.' It was beautiful but painful to see the sentiments flicker on her face. How he wished he could read her. 'I do.'

'I don't know what time it is.'

'Neither do I.'

'Is the house asleep?'

'I think so. I haven't heard anyone.'

'So we're all alone.'

'We're not alone. We're together.'

She'd been as hungry for pleasure as he was. As desperate to touch him, to let him touch her. Closing his eyes, Leo softly kissed Grace's forehead.

It felt correct, holding her this way. As if he'd finally found an elusive part of himself that had insisted on hiding away. But as he stroked Grace's face, holding her close in the silence of the library, Grace slowly pulled away from him.

She sat awkwardly on the edge of the chaise longue, arranging her hair. Just as Leo was about to speak, she spoke instead. 'I supposed that was a productive lesson.'

'Yes. I suppose. If—if we are to persist with that metaphor.'

It had been so much more than a dispassionate lesson in pleasure. She had to know that, just as he did. But before he could even attempt to amount a defence, Grace spoke again.

'We should go to our own bedrooms and sleep.'

'Do you want to? Truly?'

'Yes. And... and I don't think you should stay here any longer.'

Not the response he had expected. Not the one he had hoped for, if he were honest with himself. Leo leaned backward, suddenly cold despite the heat of the fire that had by now sunk low in the grate.

'But I've only just arrived.' A very weak excuse, but the only one he could think of. 'And I'm not a gentleman yet. I am technically, but I'm hardly a—'

'I don't intend to interrupt your education.' Grace was speaking in the brisk, practical tone she normally used for organising excursions on the Marton Estate. Leo usually found himself invigorated by such a

tone, but now it only chilled him further. 'But Hebble, the village closest to the castle—where you went to see the tailor—has more than enough ways to furnish you with the knowledge you need.'

'But—but where will I stay?'

'There are many inns that will have you. I will fund any expense.'

'I can't possibly ask you to do that.'

'You're not asking me. I'm telling you, because you can't stay here.'

An entirely unexpected wave of tension rose in Leo. Something akin to anger, dark and desperate. Not connected to the abrupt way in which he was being exiled from the castle after such a long journey to arrive here, but instead to the haunted, almost guilty look in Grace's eyes.

Why was she so afraid of this? Of the way the world blazed into colour when they looked at one another, all light and singing beauty? It was one thing to genuinely believe that their intense attraction would somehow compromise his quest to become a gentleman, which was very probably true, but it was clear that this wasn't the real reason Grace was sending him into exile.

She was scared of what she felt for him. Scared enough to send him away rather than risk an interruption to her life, her work. And given just how ready he himself was to leave all scholarship behind for her, or at least let it take second place with Grace an undisputed first, the knowledge stung like salt in a wound.

'You will learn everything you need in Hebble. I'll make sure of it.' Grace's voice had dipped so low that it was almost as if she was talking to herself. Leo leaned closer, straining to hear her even though he knew he wouldn't like her words. 'You'll have the correct clothes made. A succession of people to teach you correct modes of behaviour. By the time you've made your name in London, you'll never want to leave it. You'll love your new place in the world.'

'I doubt it.'

'I'll write as many letters as I can to my contacts in Hebble, asking —'

'Thank you. Thank you very much.' The words he truly wished to say were too raw, too frightening. He could be taught a waltz, taught how to tie his cravat correctly, but he couldn't be taught courage. 'I'll prepare to leave tomorrow morning.'

'Mr. Thornfall, I—'

I'll begin packing my things. I don't need a maid to help me.'

He dressed as quickly as he could, leaving his breeches unbuttoned in his haste, and walked from the room with his head held high. He expected Grace to say something, do something—but there was no movement as he opened the door, and no sound as he closed

it.

The night was very long. The new and intriguing types of spider on his windowsill didn't succeed in distracting him, however hard he tried, while counting the stones that made up his ceiling refused to bring sleep. Leo eventually tried to write a letter to Alice, telling her how soon her problem would be resolved, but worlds failed him as soon as he tried to put pen to paper.

Nothing would work. Nothing stood any hope of working until he decided what to say to Grace, how to say it, and when exactly he would say it to her before his carriage took him to Hebble. He sat at the dusty wooden desk which wobbled under his fingers and tried, tried with every ounce of his considerable brainpower, to invent a completely fool-proof way of explaining his feelings.

But he was no poet. He was a scholar, a different and far lesser beast, and words of this sort had to be groped for in the dark rather than found in a convenient book. The thought of saying something to Grace that could be found imperfect, could be rejected due to shoddy thinking, meant that only a few rough sentences had come to Leo by the time the sun rose.

No more came as he ate his breakfast in the cold, cavernous dining hall: creamy porridge served by an unsmiling Mrs Boyle, along with a large cup of coffee that only served to make him more anxious. Not a single word arose as he packed up the last of his things, handing them to the coachman as a rumble of thunder sounded overhead.

Rain began to fall. Leo looked up at the grim, high walls of the castle, drops of water rolling down his neck and face.

She would come to say goodbye to him, wouldn't she? He couldn't expect, but he could hope. Just as his heart began to sink, a pale but familiar face appeared at the door.

Grace already had a paintbrush in her hand. She was holding it in a clenched fist, as one would hold a weapon. Leo looked at the pallor of her skin, the shadows under her eyes that spoke of a night as sleepless as his own, and bit his lip as a swell of love and pity threatened to bring tears to his eyes.

There was nothing he could possibly say to this woman that would change her mind. She was clearly ready to defend herself, her solitude and freedom, at any cost. Even if he had prepared the most beautiful speech in the world and whispered it in her ear to the sound of violins, he would never be anything more than an obstruction to her dreams.

But he loved her. At least he could admit that to himself now, without censoring his thoughts. Leo bowed low, drops of rain splashing onto his boots.

Grace curtseyed. A last, wild hope rose in Leo, as fiercely coloured as a sunrise.

‘I’ll come back before I leave for London.’ He wasn’t going to ask for permission. She owed him this, and she had to know it. ‘One week.’

For a long time Grace did nothing. Then, with a jerk of her head that was almost too quick to count as a nod, she vanished inside.

Leo stood still in the steadily-increasing rain. By the time it had begun to fall in earnest, there was a smile on his face that not even the most vicious storm could have wiped away.

One last time. He would be able to see her one last time before London, before the ball, before everything changed. Yes, his heart would break—but there was a week between now and then, enough time to push that thought so deep that he could pretend to forget it.

He would become a gentleman in a week. He would work harder than he ever had in his life. With his smile still firmly on his face, Leo turned and walked towards the carriage.

In the castle, the week passed with agonising slowness. The sun rose and fell as if moving through amber, turning the heather a thousand shades of gold before the moon lit it with silver.

He would arrive in the evening. Grace had woken up at dawn despite knowing when Leo would come; her body wouldn’t let her sleep, charged with a desperate excitement that wouldn’t fade however much she hit her pillow with clenched fists, screamed into the linen and goose-feathers until her throat was hoarse. Only when she felt thoroughly ashamed of herself did she rise, dress, drag her stupid canvas out to her stupid chosen spot and paint a few stupid daubs, spending half the morning agonising over the exact position of a small hillock before giving up in a huff.

Mrs Boyle left her usual tray at the door of her bedroom when luncheon was served. Along with the usual bread, potted meat and whichever vegetable had taken her fancy, the housekeeper had left a small sprig of heather in a glass vase. Grace picked it up, thoroughly astonished at such a poetic sign of fellow feeling.

Had Mrs Boyle really detected her sadness? The woman never seemed to display any sentiment other than annoyance. Still—this little sprig of flower seemed full of meaning, a kinship that Grace had never expected but deeply welcome.

She placed the flower at her bedside. Then, with a weary shake of her head at her own laziness and a sigh at how helpless she felt, she lay fully-clothed on the blankets and fell into a troubled sleep until the sun had sunk low in the sky.

She woke with a start, mouth dry and heart pounding, not

knowing where or who she was. When she remembered that Leo was coming back—that Leo had been gone for seven days, that she had all but sent him away—she clenched the blankets in her fists, sure that she would never be able to rise again.

But Mrs Boyle was shuffling up the stairs, no doubt with a maid at hand to sweep anything that needed to be swept. Grace rose from the bed, barely bothering to smooth down the plentiful creases in her dress as she ran to the window.

A small black dot was just visible on the horizon, moving slowly amidst the rolling fields of heather. Leo's carriage; he was coming back, just as he said he would, despite her insistence that he should stay away for as long as possible.

Would he be a gentleman now? What would he have become?

She ran downstairs, almost tripping on the great stone steps. She waited in the entrance hall, trembling, until Leo walked through the door.

This time there was no tumbling over the threshold. With a slow, elegant pace that allowed any onlooker to see the perfect precision of his bearing, the expert cut of his clothes and the studied carelessness of his expression, Leo stepped over the threshold and stood in the light streaming in from the doorway.

He looked exquisite. The very model of a fashionable gentleman, from the shine of his boots to the coiffure of his hair. His new trousers were tight enough to display the muscles of his thighs, while the cut of his coat seemed to make him stand taller. Grace stared at him, wordless, fighting an instinctive urge to run.

He looked exactly like every gentleman who had scorned her in the past. Who had laughed at her, said terrible things behind her back. Only when she looked in his eyes and saw Leo there, the same shy scholar that had practically tripped over his own feet when he'd arrived a week ago, did she feel a rush of relief so strong that it almost took her breath away.

'Well.' She struggled to keep her voice steady. 'How has the village treated you?'

'With kindness and consideration.' Leo set his hat down on a nearby table, walking into the room. His new clothes accentuated his height, his physical splendour; Grace averted her eyes for a moment, trying not to bite her lip. He looked as if he was born to stride through a public square, not hide in a library. 'I've been tailored to the hilt, the gentleman who owns the guest-house has given me a very thorough knowledge of which fashionable vintages to request, and the marquess—very generous with his time and attention, given the great quantity of things he has to do—has put me through my paces when it comes to conversation.'

‘I’m very glad.’

‘I can now speak at length about any number of ferociously dull things.’

‘I see.’ She couldn’t help but smile. ‘That’s the most important skill to possess, I think.’

‘I’m sure I’ll be a success when I enter the ton. Enough to make my father happy, and make him leave Alice alone.’ Leo nodded to himself, his voice quieter. ‘And then it’ll be done.’

‘Once you’ve become a gentleman of fashion, you’ll become more in demand by the day. You’ll be besieged with visiting cards.’

‘I know. You told me.’

The memory of what had happened in the library crept out of the dark corners of Grace’s mind, wrapping itself around her like a warm blanket. Holding him, kissing him—telling him, when all of it was over and fear had assailed her, that his life would change more than he could possibly imagine. Change so much that she, through sheer necessity, wouldn’t fit in at all.

‘It won’t last forever.’ She cleared her throat. ‘When you find a spare moment after becoming the toast of the ton, you can go back to your studies.’

‘Just as you’ve gone back to your canvases. You’ve been painting, I assume.’

‘... No.’ What was the point of lying? He’d only ask to see the pictures, and then she’d have to show him canvases devoid of paint. ‘In truth, I haven’t been able to draw so much as a tree. The rest of the landscape is utterly beyond me.’

It was cruel to do this. To let him see even an iota of her sadness when they had already been so commendably clear with one another, cancelling out any possibility of a shared future. But he was so handsome in his new coat, and she’d been so dreadfully frustrated with her painting, and—and now he was back, even if he’d only been away for a week, things felt better.

She couldn’t feel better. If she started feeling better when a particular gentleman crossed the threshold, a lifetime of woe awaited her. But before she could harden her heart, Leo took another step forward.

‘I’m so sorry that you couldn’t find the peace to paint.’

‘It’s nothing. An abominable change of humour that will change back when the weather turns. A good storm, something to shake the heather up, and I’ll be well again.’

‘I—I’m glad. In truth, I—’

‘What?’

‘I tried to look at the books I brought with me for this journey. Tried to make more than the simplest deductions from the material set

before me.' Leo's smile was very sad. 'But I couldn't.'

It was too much. Too much to stand before him as if they were strangers, as if she didn't feel an overwhelming tide of sentiment whenever she looked at him. She clenched her fists as she stepped forward, trying to stop herself, but the urge to be close to him was too strong.

Leo stepped forward too. The air between them was hot, charged with unknown energy as he reached out, gently taking a flyaway strand of Grace's hair in his palm.

'Don't worry.' He spoke low and urgently. 'I won't ask if things have changed, because they haven't. I won't ask if you have changed, because you haven't, and won't, and that's the most wonderful thing about you. I know that this must end, will end tomorrow morning when I leave—I know that I may never see you again, apart from fleeting glances at the Marton Estate, and I've made as much peace with that as I can. But being here with you, speaking to you, makes me surer than ever of needing to know you—really, truly know you—one last time. If you'll permit me.'

It wasn't a question of permission. They had begun something before he'd left for the village, something that needed a conclusion. To leave it undone would be a denial of destiny.

And she wanted to touch him again. Wanted it more than anything else in the world. Which is why, with a single, taut nod, she reached out and took his hand.

The fire was still there. If anything, it was burning higher after a week of absence. Leo started; Grace gripped his fingers tightly, moving closer.

'The library.' It was difficult to speak. 'Now.'

Leo nodded. His footsteps sounded behind her as Grace ushered him away from the entrance hall, fighting the urge to break into a run.

The library felt like a thousand miles away, but she managed it. She slammed the door shut, pulling the heavy bolt across it, and threw herself into Leo's waiting embrace as if he were a pool of water in the desert.

'This is the last time. Absolutely the last.' She repressed a sigh of pure pleasure as Leo's hands stroked along the underside of her breasts. 'Understood?'

'Yes, Miss Fellowes. I understand.'

Was that an edge of melancholy in Leo's voice? A glimpse of something deeper—something that matched the depth of her own buried sentiments? No matter, it could matter, not now: not with Leo's thumbs on her hardening nipples, his touch so wickedly gentle that it was all Grace could do not to cry out.

They fell onto the chaise longue in a hungry rush. Every layer of



clothing was suddenly a ridiculous barrier, a limit to be overtaken: stockings, gown, shirt, trousers. Grace fell into it with such desperate eagerness, fingertips practically sparking as she hastily tugged at her own garments, that it was only when Leo's bare skin rested against the thin linen of her shift that she realised with a shock what she was doing.

She and Leo, naked. Almost naked, which made the brief flashes of skin on skin utterly thrilling in a way she had never experienced before. She was wet between her thighs, slick in a way that felt debased and ferociously exciting all at once.

Leo was staring down at her. His dark eyes reflected the same shock filling her. For a long, silent moment Grace stared back, wordless, the weight of his body filling her with an anticipation that she only partly understood.

Then Leo shifted his hips. The hunger that flooded Grace as he moved against her, his rigid member pressed to her inner thighs, sent a jolt of lust through her so strong that she almost cried out.

Leo's mouth covered hers again, hot, demanding. Grace matched him kiss for kiss, but she needed more. Needed to run her tongue along the line of Leo's neck, needed to sink her teeth into his shoulders just hard enough to make him shiver and buck against her, his cock ever closer to her mound. Needed to cling to him, to tangle her fingers in his hair and press herself tightly to him, nodding in delirious, silent agreement as Leo fiercely pulled her shift away from her breasts.

This time there was no caution as his mouth covered her nipple. It was as if he'd been dreaming of this day, this moment; he sucked with deep, rhythmic tugs, gently pinning her to the chaise longue as he wrapped his fingers around her wrists. All Grace could do was writhe in his arms, arching her back in delicious surrender as Leo moved from one breast to the other, lavishing such attention on her stiff, swollen nipples that they soon grew flushed from his tongue.

For a long, perfect time it felt as if he would never stop. That they would stay on the brink of ecstasy forever, Leo's mouth on her breasts, holding her with such graceful strength that after a while her body felt as if it belonged to him. Eventually Leo pulled away; Grace looked down at her own breasts in a kind of dazed astonishment, wondering how she had been given so much pleasure.

'I could do this forever.' Leo's voice was low, trembling. 'Do you know that?'

'I raise no objections.'

'But this is the last time.' Leo paused. 'So forever isn't something we have.'

'No.' Why would he transport her from such happiness to such

despair in the space of a single moment? No matter that she'd been the one to say it first—she didn't want to be reminded of it. 'It isn't.'

'But the concept of eternity makes what we do less valuable. It removes the preciousness of things. Several great philosophers have noted this very idea.'

'Are we truly going to speak of philosophy at this precise moment?'

'No. It's a way for me to work up the courage to ask to kiss you between your legs.'

'... I see.'

'I want to taste you. May I?'

Grace had never heard of such a thing. Any carnal knowledge she possessed had come from occasional gossip with the Unmarriageables and observation of livestock in the fields around the castle. Such an act had been notably absent from both fields of study—but the thrill that ran through her body when Leo suggested it, as if a part of her had caught fire, made her nod before she could think better of it.

Leo bent his head. The slow, burning trail of kisses he left along her stomach made her body feel strange, sanctified, as if something holy were touching her. Then, with a brief but potent look that all but stopped Grace's heart in her chest, he moved lower.

His first kiss at the head of her mound, just above her patch of curls, sent a deep tremble through her body. The next, a sensuous brush of his lips against her wet slit, had Grace gripping the fabric of the chaise longue to keep from crying out. When Leo finally parted her waiting flesh with his tongue, running it over her slick inner lips and holding it against her bud, the fireworks at Grace's core shot to new, dizzying heights.

He licked her as if he loved the taste of her. As if all he'd been dreaming of during his absence was this: her hips upturned to him, her most intimate place laid open to his appetites. The pleasure was raw, savage, almost painful; he gave her no quarter, kissing her bud again and again, delving deep into her with his tongue in a way that made Grace's toes curl with pleasure, made her tangle her fingers in his hair and keep him there.

Every second that passed, every minute, brought a new wave of sensation that had her moaning into the cushions of the chaise longue. Soon time was immaterial; they had always been here, just like this, rooted together as immovably as two trees. She had always been helpless against this onslaught of pleasure, taken beyond shame, spurred onward to some new, wild place by Leo's tongue, Leo's lips. Leo's eyes.

But this would be the end. This was the last time. Just as Grace remembered that unpalatable fact, absorbed it into her bones, a peak

of pleasure came that engulfed her entirely.

‘Oh, God.’ She cried out, too far gone to care how loud she was being. All that mattered was this ecstasy, hot as fire, sweet as honey. She pulled Leo up by the roots of his hair; his moan as he kissed her, deep and hungry, made her unravelling even more fierce.

A long, wordless stretch of time passed as her body cooled, her mind quieted. Leo was still in her arms; she could feel his heartbeat, steady, strong. Eventually, with a sigh that seemed to come from deep within his core, Leo moved away from her.

‘Where are you going?’

‘London.’

‘But I—’

‘Don’t. Please.’ Leo’s voice shook. ‘One more word from you, and I’ll stay forever. But you don’t want that, so—so don’t.’

Grace opened her mouth, then closed it. Her body was still drugged with pleasure, but her mind was opening wide to a new, deep pain.

‘Goodbye, Miss Fellowes.’ Leo bowed. His stance was perfectly correct. ‘And thank you.’

Grace blinked. Before she could come to her senses, the library door had slammed shut.

The days passed with confounding slowness. Although the sun and moon rose at their usual hours, no breath of wind or unexpected event interrupted the glacial stillness of the time that was meant to be passing. It was as if the castle had been marooned in a wide, endless sea, with no aid or comfort in sight.

There wasn’t enough paint in the world. There weren’t enough canvases, enough brushes. In the highest tower of the castle, in a room full of pigeon-feathers and dust and with a roof in worrying danger of falling in, Grace painted with such vigour that she half-feared she’d break her easel.

Any hint of realistic landscapes had been abandoned. The rolling hills dotted with heather had become mountains, dark cliffs with sea-birds whirling over stormy seas. The greens, golds, yellows of her habitual palette lay under a dust sheet in one corner, along with all the canvases that she had tried and failed to complete since Leo had left.

Painting was more vigorous than most sports, particularly if one did it from dawn to dusk. Her back ached, her fingers grew stiffer each morning, and climbing the stairs to the tower was a painful pilgrimage rather than a joy. But if she didn’t do this—if she didn’t wake with the sun and lock herself away in a self-made cloister until darkness came again—she would be forced to sit down, to think, and

that was to be avoided at all costs.

She couldn't think about Leo. About the way he'd looked at her that last, searing time before he'd got into his carriage, his stance so much more elegant and purposeful that it had been when he'd arrived. The way he'd caressed her the last time they'd been together, truly together, and she'd been vulnerable in a way she'd never expected to feel.

He would be the toast of the ton. He would be a dramatic success, even if he didn't believe it. His life would become so full of pleasure, excitement, passion, that any scholarly pleasures would be left behind in the dust—and she, the woman with paint smudges on her face and a deeply confused attitude to her own heart, would be left in this castle until she were little more than a ghost.

'Come on, shipwreck.' She murmured to the canvas as she painted in quick, savage strokes, squinting at the marks she'd made. She'd never tried to paint a ship sinking beneath storm-tossed waves before, but there was a first time for everything. Perhaps she'd add a screaming sailor clinging to the mast, a monstrous sea creature sending out tentacles to trap any unsuspecting men still on the shattered remains of the ship...

... or perhaps she'd have to sit on a pile of turpentine-scented rags, drink the cup of tea Mrs Boyle had brought her some hours ago that now sat cold on the cobwebbed windowsill, and actually think about alternatives to staying in this room for the rest of her life.

'No.' She bit her lip as she sketched in a figure, one hand clutching the mast. 'No, I don't think so.'

The sound of footsteps made her heart skip a beat. Hope filled her; she put a hand to her brow, forcing the feeling to the back of her mind. It was Mrs Boyle, it was always Mrs Boyle; none of the maids ever dared to disturb her here.

'Ma'am?' Mrs Boyle's voice came from the other side of the door. Grace, swallowing back a vicious spear of disappointment, went to open it.

'I brought you another cup of tea, ma'am.' Mrs Boyle looked and sounded completely unaffected after climbing fifty stone steps while holding a tray. 'And some biscuits, in case you needed nourishment.'

'Thank you.' Grace had been crumbling up the biscuits and feeding them to the sparrows that sat on the windowsill, but Mrs Boyle didn't need to know that. 'You're very kind.'

'It's my duty, ma'am. A part of being in service.'

'Of—of course.'

'But...' Mrs Boyle paused. For a moment she looked deeply uncomfortable, almost frightened, before straightening her back and continuing. 'But if you need me to be kind, ma'am, I can be.'

Grace blinked. Such tender words from Mrs Boyle were the equivalent of a sword turning into a bunch of flowers. She took a step backward, taking the tray of tea and biscuits with hands that shook a little. 'I'm sure I don't know what you—'

'Of course. I'll return to my post.'

'N-No.' She was so lonely. She'd tried to hide herself behind her easel for so long, and all it had done was make her long for human contact with an intensity that was almost maddening. Letters to friends were impossible, letters to Leo more impossible still. 'Please. Come in.'

Mrs Boyle nodded. She stepped gingerly over the threshold, looking around the tiny tower room with such evident distaste that Grace almost wanted to laugh. 'Are you sure you don't wish for the maids to clean this room, ma'am?'

'No. I know it looks like mess, but there's an order to it if one looks hard enough.'

'One could say that about all messes, ma'am. If one truly considers them.'

Better to take a large gulp of tea than attempt to reply to that. Grace set the tray down on the flagstones and held the cup in both hands, breathing in the comforting smell of tea and milk, waiting to feel calmer. When calm didn't come, even after a deeply awkward minute of silence, she inwardly rolled her eyes and took another gulp of tea.

'I'm sure I'll feel better in a little while.' Her own voice sounded unpleasantly brisk. 'More time painting. Perhaps some sleep.'

'May I be frank, ma'am?'

'Of course.' Grace hadn't been aware that Mrs Boyle had been containing herself. 'Go on.'

'I think you've done quite enough painting for a little while. The only picture that makes any sense is the one you painted while Mr. Thornfall was here.' Mrs Boyle's voice was as crisp as a northern winter. 'The rest aren't up to your usual standard, and I think you know it.'

Frank indeed. Grace took yet another gulp, wishing the cup of tea was considerably larger.

'So in my opinion, it's time to come down from this room—which hasn't been used since your grandfather's day, as if I need to remind you, and has more spiders living in it than either of us need to know about—and eat something nourishing. Calf jelly, soup. Agnes can brush the tangles out of your hair, seeing as she's the strongest of us, and you can wash yourself in the basin until all that paint's come off. And then you can have a sleep, a proper well-fed sleep, but not a very long one. You have much to do.'

‘If I can’t paint, I don’t have anything to do.’

‘If you’re going to travel down to London and apologise to Mr. Thornfall, you have a very great deal to do.’ Mrs Boyle stared at her, unblinking. ‘The important thing is to start.’

After such a swift and effective conversational blow, Grace didn’t know where to begin. She stared down at her teacup, agonised to find it empty.

‘I read that letter you wrote to the papers. A long time ago now, but I can still remember it. I remember how frightened your mother and father were, and how angry. Not with you—it’s difficult to be angry with young ladies, they don’t know the world yet—but they worried about you. Worried enough to insist that you come here and live a quieter life for a while, in case London was a corrupting influence.’

‘There was no corrupting influence. Merely the inner knowledge that marriage was incompatible with the type of life I wish to lead.’

‘And I think they realised that, in time. Your mother and father.’ Mrs Boyle paused. ‘But they worried about you. They still worry about you. They would worry about you even if you were the most happily married woman in Christendom, with six fine sons and a lovely manor to live in. But I’ve always been able to appease their worries with the letters I write to them from here. I’ve always been able to say, in no uncertain terms, that within the walls of this castle you’re both safe and content—that you’re doing the work you wish to do, even if they don’t understand it. But this week, ma’am, as I sat down and began to write my letter, I realised that I couldn’t do it. That if I told them you were happy, I would be lying.’

Such simple words, but so devastating. Grace gently put the teacup back on the tray, turning more fully to Mrs Boyle.

‘I can’t write to them and say you’re content. That you’re doing the work you’re meant to do—that you’re flourishing, even if it’s in a different way from other ladies of your age and station. I don’t trade in falsehoods, ma’am, and I don’t wish to try. Which is why you need to go to London and repair whatever rupture there’s been with Mr. Thornfall, so I can write an honest letter again.’ Mrs Boyle gave a very slight nod. ‘Do it for me, if not for yourself.’

‘I—I thought you disapproved of Mr. Thornfall.’

‘I disapprove of any gentleman who arrives at a lady’s residence uninvited. But you evidently approve of him, and he clearly cares for you very deeply.’ Mrs Boyle sniffed. ‘You certainly improved both his appearance and manners over the course of his stay, even if the village provided some auxiliary help. I’m sure that in time you could teach him the importance of advising a household of one’s intention to stay there.’

‘Any sentimental union between myself and Mr. Thornfall is an impossibility.’

‘You all but locked yourself in this tower after he left. A sentimental union clearly already exists. Not that I wish to discuss the particulars.’ Mrs Boyle’s disapproving tone was still frightening, no matter what kind end it was employed for. ‘It’s much easier to nourish those sentiments than kill them.’

‘As I’ve already said, a sentimental life concluded by marriage is something I have no interest in. The letter to the papers confirmed it.’

‘Two of your friends who helped write that letter have been married since its publication.’

‘And that’s wonderful for them! But I would be the most atrocious sort of hypocrite.’

‘And so your friends are hypocrites too.’

‘That isn’t what I meant.’

‘Then why are their situations different? They wrote that letter with as much strength of mind as you did. Presumably meeting their respective husbands didn’t transform them into blithering idiots.’ Mrs Boyle’s gaze grew very forbidding. ‘Why are they allowed to change their minds, but the same action on your part would make you a hypocrite? Explain it to me.’

Grace couldn’t, and she was fairly sure Mrs Boyle knew it. She settled for a weak shake of her head as the woman went on.

‘If you ask me, it’s time to stop behaving as if you’re cut from worse cloth than the rest of the world.’ Mrs Boyle sniffed. ‘You’re as permitted to change your mind as any other creature.’

‘Artists aren’t meant to live with distractions.’

‘Nonsense. Rich men who dabble in art have decided artists shouldn’t have distractions—and you’re comfortable, ma’am, but not rich enough to cut yourself off from the rest of the world. More than that, I don’t think you want to. Now—look at what I have in my reticule.’

A somewhat abrupt change of subject, but one had to keep up where Mrs Boyle was concerned. Grace looked obediently, even though her mind was racing.

‘Mr. Thornfall brought two sets of spectacles with him for his stay.’ Mrs Boyle reached into her reticule. To Grace’s astonishment, she brought out a pair of wire-rimmed lenses. ‘He appears to have left one pair behind.’

‘He did? How did he forget—’

‘Who knows, ma’am? Perhaps someone took them off a side table in a neglected moment.’ Mrs Boyle’s face was unreadable. ‘Mistakes can happen.’

Grace reached out. She took hold of the spectacles, surprisingly

heavy despite their size, curling her fingers around them as gently as she could.

Then, with a sudden rush of breath that came perilously close to a sob, she pulled Mrs Boyle into a hug.

‘I’ll eat. I’ll eat as much calf jelly as you want me to.’ She muttered into the woman’s ear, sure that she sounded insane but too happy to care. ‘And then I’ll wash, and if Agnes is ready—’

‘She’s been itching to brush your hair for days. She’ll be more than ready.’

‘And then I’ll have to have my things packed. But how long will that take?’ She had let herself rot in this tower for a week when she could have been planning, deciding, feeling. *Acting*. ‘Oh, Mrs Boyle, I—I’ll never be able to thank you enough.’

‘I was young once too, ma’am.’ Mrs Boyle smiled. Grace had never seen such a soft expression on the woman’s wrinkled face. ‘You can repay me by remembering that you’re young now. Right—get away with you, so I can clear up this sty of a room. Don’t run too fast down those tower steps, or you’ll trip.’

The woman almost always knew what Grace was going to do before she did it. Kissing Mrs Boyle’s cheek before she could bat her away, Grace left the room.

She would go to London. She would stay at Arabella’s estate if need be. And when the ball came, she would walk across that glittering space full of suspicious glances and tell Leo how she felt, however much it frightened her.

She would allow herself to feel. It was all she could do. Whatever would come, would come.

The Berriwick Ball, if those who wrote the gossip rags were to be believed, was already a much more exciting prospect than the usual ton event. Not only were there several female attendees who had suffered their names being splashed all over the pages of London’s more common set of papers, but the wine was also plentiful enough—and the food scarce enough—to ensure at least a few more scandals before the night was out. But far beyond this common fodder, the writers of the most salacious tales were all aflutter at the prospect of a guest—a guest whose presence was a rare and astonishing surprise, especially when one considered the transformation that had been wrought in him.

On the other side of the ballroom from said phenomenon, the quieter sort of guests drank, conversed, and pretended they weren’t gossiping.

‘Well.’ Benedict took a gloomy sip of champagne and reached down for his wife’s hand. He raised an eyebrow as Bertha glanced at



him. 'I can officially say, without censure or restraint, that this evening is an enormous disappointment.'

'Come now.' Bertha rolled her eyes, smiling. 'You spent an hour cooing over Lily before we left. I thought you weren't going to let the wet-nurse take her.'

'I still think we could bring a small baby to the ball without inviting any undue comment. She'd be the most beautiful creature in the room of course, outclassing every young lady making their debut, but they'd overcome it in time. And I wasn't referring to the earlier part of the evening, which was exquisite in every way.'

'It's rude to speak of one's friend as an enormous disappointment.'

'Look at him, Bertha.' Benedict gestured subtly but expressively to the other side of the ballroom, where a small crowd had formed. 'How can I be anything but disappointed about how all of this has turned out?'

Leo Thornfall stood in the centre of the hubbub. Benedict could just about see his perfectly coiffed hair, a hint of a smile as he produced yet another anecdote that had the group of ladies and gentlemen in stitches. Eventually, with a graceful bow of his head, Leo moved along to another group; some ladies openly followed him, fluttering their fans like wings as they closed in on their prey.

'Whatever your true motives were when you wrote that letter to Grace, you must admit that Mr. Thornfall has achieved exactly what he wanted. He wished to become a fashionable gentleman, you asked Grace to form him into a fashionable gentleman, and that's exactly what she has done.' Bertha paused. 'Quite what you were expecting, I really don't know.'

'I expected a letter to arrive to Marton in very short order asking for a special license. I expected a wedding before the month was out!'

'You're a most impatient Cupid.'

'I've been patient for at least a year, watching them look at one another and never say more than hello or goodbye. I've been exceedingly impatient. And frankly, my love, given how marvellous I was at wooing you, I was expecting Grace to succumb very easily to Leo's charms.'

'You were marvellous at wooing me, dear, but vicarious wooing is a very difficult skill. Best to be left to more experienced Cupids, I think. And Grace is far less susceptible than I am.'

'That casts unpleasant aspersions on my wooing skills.'

'So prickly.' Bertha stroked his palm. 'My hedgehog.'

'Don't be so sweet to me in public. Not unless you want another child in short order.'

'It would be nice for Lily to have a sibling.'

'Then let us finish this rather sour champagne and go home as

soon as possible.' Benedict gulped down the rest of his champagne. 'Greet any friends that need greeting, and so on—oh. Wait.'

He stopped, empty champagne glass in hand, as Grace entered the ballroom. Bertha's hand tightened in his; Benedict squeezed it, setting down the glass on the tray of a passing waiter.

'Hmm.' A line of concern had appeared between Bertha's brows. 'Unexpected.'

'Not unexpected for Cupid.' Benedict often felt triumphant—with a wife and daughter like Bertha and Lily, what man wouldn't be?—but Grace's sudden appearance caused a certain measure of satisfaction. 'Not unexpected at all.'

'But she can't be thinking of making a scene.'

'And why not? I would have made a scene in the first days of our courtship.'

'Our courtship lasted a week and was conducted almost entirely through letters. How could you have made anything resembling a scene?'

'I don't know. A letter written in red ink. But stop interrupting—we should watch this.'

'I think we'll have to do more than watch. She's approaching.'

It was true. Rather than make a beeline for Leo, Grace was coming directly towards him. Benedict tried to smile in a way that wasn't too smug, but could feel the contentment radiating from him in waves as Grace came to a stop in front of them.

He bit back a sudden, ferocious swear word as the woman stepped heavily on his foot.

'Forgive me, Bertha.' Grace turned immediately to Bertha, enveloping her in a tight embrace before Benedict could demand what on earth was going on. 'Your husband played a deeply irritating trick on me, and deserved an irritating punishment.'

'I quite agree, dear.' Bertha's tone was entirely unsurprised. 'Arabella's husband helped as well, so best to conserve a little energy for another stamp.'

'I'll have to find him later.' Grace detached herself from Bertha, putting her hands on her hips. She wasn't dressed for the evening, her hair quite wild; Benedict gritted his teeth, not wanting to admit that she looked elegant all the same. 'Mr. Harrow—'

'Look. I apologise for the deception.' He needed another glass of champagne. 'But not really.'

'Would you like another stamp?'

'I don't deserve one, because you're here. Which means it worked.'

'Perhaps not. Perhaps I simply travelled down from Cumbria to punish you.'

'Oh, now, I don't think that's true.'

‘Where... where is he?’

‘There.’ Benedict languidly pointed. ‘Surrounded by his new admirers, thanks to your work.’

Grace turned. As Benedict watched her face change, he fought an unexpected stab of pity.

He remembered that look. He’d seen it on his own face whenever he looked in the mirror and thought of Bertha. The light in his eyes that had come at the mere idea of her—the wistful, half-dreaming expression that meant one was utterly at the mercy of another.

‘Go to him.’ He hadn’t meant to sound quite so fervent. But when Grace nodded in response, moving through the crowd of revellers, Benedict allowed himself to feel a touch of triumph.

‘Well done.’ Bertha squeezed his hand. ‘Very well done, dearest.’

‘Let’s make our excuses and go home. I want to hold Lily and listen to you read to the both of us.’ Benedict smiled. ‘Given what’s already occurred, staying out any longer feels like tempting fate.’

Boredom. Distilled, concentrated boredom, the kind that would take an alchemist months to produce. Leo took a sip of his champagne, the angle of his glass perfectly judged, and murmured something flatteringly non-committal to the gentleman currently relating a dull anecdote about a new chophouse.

It was almost like a mathematical pattern, except with none of the fun. Certain comments required other comments, certain smiles other smiles. It was like being trapped in the cogs and gears of an automaton, unable to stop the process or change it in any way.

Grace had spoken of this as if it would be the pinnacle of his life. The start of a new journey that would see him scale dizzying social heights. But he was doing everything right, receiving the reaction that he’d so desperately needed, and—and oh, he didn’t care at all.

He was happy for Alice, but in an abstract way. All he wanted, all he could care about, was seeing Grace again. Preferably in a dark, quiet space where he could tell her just how much she meant to him.

He closed his eyes for the briefest of moments, not caring if anyone looked. After the performance he’d given tonight, Alice’s future was assured. He could allow himself this tiny piece of pleasure, could allow himself to imagine Grace in all her fiery glory, her dark hair untameable, her personality wilder still.

A ripple of hushed gasps from the ladies and gentlemen around him made him open his eyes. He turned.

There she was. As if she had never been away, as if these days in London had been little more than an inconsequential dream. Grace was standing before him in the flesh, wearing a gown that carried the scent of heather and fresh air with it, staring at him as if he was the

only person left on earth.

All of Leo's etiquette failed him. It was as if he'd never read a book, never learned a thing. He was the same shy, diffident scholar he'd always been, standing in front of the same brave woman who'd bewitched him the very first moment he saw her.

She was holding his spare pair of spectacles in her hand.

'I didn't think there would be so many people.' Grace blinked as if coming to her senses. Leo noted the small crowd forming around them, but decided to ignore them. 'I've grown unused to events like this one.'

'An event needs to be at least this size to stand any hope of making an impression. At least three of your books taught me that.'

'I'm glad you read so attentively. I... I wish I'd been a better teacher.'

Whispers had begun at the edges of the ballroom. Women were holding their fans to their faces, speaking animatedly behind them; Leo stepped towards Grace, fighting every urge he had to take her in his arms here and now, crowds and gossip be damned.

He had to fight it. Seeing Grace so far away from the comforting walls of her castle made one thing extremely clear. Grace, for all her stridency at home and on the Marton Estate, was even more uncomfortable in this glittering room than he was.

They truly were twin souls. Underneath their different forms lay a single heart, ready to beat. And rather than subject Grace to the horror of a public conversation, he was going to have to cause at least a mild commotion.

He reached for Grace's hand. Grace took it as if she'd been waiting to do it ever since she approached; her fingers trembled in his. Without saying a word, without looking at the people around him, Leo made his way towards the nearest door.

It closed rather loudly behind he and Grace as he ushered her into what turned out to be an empty corridor. The previous hush of the ballroom became a crescendo of gasps and gossip; the sound travelled through the wood of the door, making Leo feel as if he and Grace were trapped inside a seashell.

'I still hate this, you know.' Before it had taken such an effort to speak to her naturally. Now it felt as if he and Grace were conversing in a language more intimate than mere words. 'You told me I'd grow to love it, but I loathe it.'

'Weaker men than you grow to love it very quickly.'

'I'm not strong. Not strong in the slightest.'

'Why?'

'Because a strong man would have told you in no uncertain terms that as soon as this dashed ball was over, he was going to come back

to Cumbria and pledge his troth to you forever. A strong man would have told you that he's been in love with you ever since he first saw you. In these matters, I am still damnably weak.'

Grace was so still, so silent, that Leo felt as if he were speaking to a statue. He waited in the hushed darkness of the corridor, head bowed as the whispers behind the ballroom door grew to a crescendo.

Then, with a broken sigh that almost sounded like a sob, Grace threw herself into his arms. Soft, warm, vital; she was everything, the weight of his world, and he would hold her until they were both dust.

'I'm sorry.' Her kisses to his neck, his jawline, were each their own firework. 'I'm sorry I sent you away.'

'I'm sorry I didn't insist on staying with you instead of meekly going to the village.'

'You wouldn't have learned anything useful with me. Not after what we did.'

'I would have learned how to love you. At the moment, that's the only thing I care at all about learning.'

'I must learn to love you too. It's the only way I'll ever be able to paint again.'

'Such a brutal thing to say! That would never appear in one of your books.'

Grace's lips were hot on his, her murmur setting him alight. 'It's an artist's declaration of love. I love you desperately—there, is that better?'

'Absolutely.' This woman was fire and ice all in one. Better than any library, any scintillating fact still waiting to be discovered. 'As a scholar, I can give you a scholarly declaration of love.'

'And what would that be?'

'I'd name every star in the universe after you. Every rock. Every interesting species of frog.'

'A wonderful declaration of love, Mr. Thornfall.'

'Leo. I am Leo, and you are Grace. The grace of God—that's you.'

Grace's kisses came again. Leo held her to him, the ballroom whispers a waterfall of sound that made their own privacy all the sweeter. He grazed his teeth against the lobe of her ear, unable to ignore the fire inside him. 'Tell me, Grace—is a gentleman's reputation entirely ruined if he pulls a lady into a service corridor in the middle of a ball?'

'Oh, Leo. You still have so much to learn.' Grace's frank, amused smile was the lever that moved his world. 'For a gentleman's reputation to be truly assured, he has to cause at least one scandal.'

'Then let's start a scandal.' Leo pulled her closer. 'One that doesn't end.'

## THE END

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